

Chapter 12: Einstein's Paradox

God's Omniscience and Man's Freedom

Introduction

Many people when they fail in their lives, they relate it to their destiny. They don't want to admit they made a mistake and hence, they failed in their exams, or marriage, business, etc. The concept of determinism or free will plays a central role in our thinking about the world particularly in our apportioning praise and blame.

Quantum theory explains in principle how to calculate what will happen in any experiment involving physical or biological systems, and how to understand how our world works.

We can, for instance, determine the exact time of the solar eclipse on 4 December 2002 in which 72% of the Sun will be covered and is visible in Australia. This foreknowledge lead us to the fact that determinism rules in the physical world.

The question that this article is dealing with is 'can we predetermine the human behaviour' and if his behaviour is foreknown whether by other humans or a divine knowledge, how can we hold him responsible for his/her action?

Nothing has been more terrible for humans throughout the history than admitting that his destiny is predetermined and he has no choice in it. Freedom has been and will be always the most pleasant word for mankind. Hence, nothing can disturb his mind that knowing that all his actions are subdued by a superpower.

This is the secret why the issue of determinism versus free will has been always and issue of concerns for philosophers and thinkers throughout the history.

Albert Einstein (1879–1955) is perhaps the best well-known scientist of the 20th century. His theory of

'General Relativity'; the most accurately tested theory known to science, lead him to acknowledge that God brought the universe into existence and that He is Intelligent. Yet, he was still puzzled with the paradox that "if God is Omniscient then how is it possible to hold man responsible for his deeds?!"

When the rabbis and persists came to congratulate him on his discovery of God, he said to them:

"If this being is Omnipotent then every occurrence, including every human action, every human thought, and every human feeling and aspiration is also His work; how is it possible to think of holding men responsible for their deeds and thoughts before such an almighty Being?"

In giving out punishment and rewards He would to a certain extent be passing judgment on Himself. How can this be combined with the goodness and righteousness ascribed to Him?"

Unfortunately, none of the clergy Einstein encountered ever gave him a satisfactory answer to his objection. Typically, they responded by saying that God has not yet revealed the answer. They encouraged him to endure patiently and blindly trust the All-Knowing One.

Being puzzled with this question, Einstein, like many other powerful intellects through the centuries, ruled out the existence of God, despite believing in a Creator.

The aim of this chapter is to suggest an answer to this on going debate about one of the most fundamental questions of human nature in a unique style presented by prominent Muslim philosophers.

Definition

The question is whether man's behaviour, thinking, and feeling are driven by something called free will, or everything is predestined and determined. In other words, is the human behaviour like other objects and events in the world determined under certain cause/s and once the cause/s being given, the event follows invariably, or human behaviour is exempted from this law for human mind has the power or ability to choose a course of action or make a decision without being subject to restraints imposed by antecedent causes, by necessity, or by divine predetermination.

On the one hand, we feel so strongly that we have behavioural choice. On the other hand, modern biology describes humans as mechanisms that follow all of the same deterministic rules as other objects in the universe. How can reconcile our feeling of Free Will with the idea that we are mechanical components of a mechanical universe?

Is none of us really responsible for his/her action? Is freedom to choose an illusion, a myth?

Scope

The validity of either of free will and determinism play a vital role for people and scientists in all different walks of life; from an average man on the street to psychology, sociology, ethics, religion, law and

philosophy.

Psychology

There is a clear dilemma in explaining human behaviour through psychological principles. On the one, hand if psychology is a science of behaviour, then there should be laws allowing the prediction of behaviour, just as there are gravitational laws to predict the behaviour of a falling object. On the other hand, objects have been raised by individuals who believe that humans control their own behaviours and possess free will.

The behaviourists, for instance, are the most obvious proponents of determinism, dating back to Jon B. Watson who made one of the most deterministic assertions ever: *“Give me a dozen healthy infants... and my own specified world to bring them up in and I’ll guarantee to take anyone at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant, chief, and yes, even beggar man and thief.”*

Other psychologists like William James, who was interested in religion and believed in free will, was reluctant to abandon the concept that behaviours were not free. At one point, he suggested that mind and body operated in tandem, whereas on another occasion he concluded that they interacted. Clearly, James struggled with the issue, and like others was unable to resolve it.

Ethics

The validity of free will has also been a subject of considerable debating among ethical philosophers. It would appear that a system of ethics must imply free will, for the denial of the ability to choose a course of action would seem to negate the possibility of moral judgment.

A person without moral judgment is not responsible for his or her actions. In an attempt to resolve this problem, ethical philosophers have taken a great variety of position, ranging from absolute determinism to absolute libertarianism.

Law

Determinism has its impact on the court cases as well. The most famous American trial lawyer of the 20th century, Clarence Darrow, was engaged to defend the murderers who had confessed. With the following speech he convinced every jury that his clients were not morally responsible for their actions and hence they don’t deserve the death penalty.

☞ *Every one knows that the heavenly bodies move in certain paths in relation to each other with seeming consistency and regularity which we call [physical] law. ... No one attributes freewill or motive to the material world. Is the conduct of man or the other animals any more subject to whim or choice than the action of the planets? ...*

We know that man's every act is induced by motives that led or urged him here or there; that the sequence of cause and effect runs through the whole universe, and is nowhere more compelling than with man."

☞ *"[Man's] legs are levers with which he walks. His back is a lever, by which he is able to lift things, through the contraction of the muscles. His arms are levers which he uses in all the activities of life. There is nothing about him that anybody can find ... which isn't mechanical."*

☞ *"The principal thing to remember is that we are all the products of heredity and environment; that we have little or no control, as individuals, over ourselves, and that criminals are like the rest of us in that regard."*

Prof. Norman Swartz: Free will and Determinism: <http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/swartz/freewill1.htm> [1]

The belief that man's feelings, thoughts and behaviours are all forced on him by one or more determinants has changed the concept of crimes and bad behaviour to be seen as a symptom of illness which requires treatment not punishment. Thus, prisons and jails must be abolished and locked hospital wards substituted for them as needed.

Fallacy of Darrow's argument

If Leopold and Loeb were not morally responsible for their behavior, it was because of what others had done to them. But these others, in turn, were not morally responsible for what they had done, since they were the product of what had earlier been done to them.

And so on, and so on. The argument works like a line of dominos, it is – in effect – the domino theory of moral non-responsibility. If someone is to be regarded as not morally responsible for what he does because he is the product of someone else's actions, then, ultimately, no one is responsible for anything he/she does.

It is interesting to note that one of Darrow's biographers reports that although Darrow constantly insisted that his clients did not deserve blame, he himself was a very vain, prideful, man who thought that he, himself, deserved high praise. That biographer comments that Darrow never quite saw, or admitted, this inconsistency in his own views!

Religion

1) Christianity

Determinism in Christianity starts with the story of creation of Adam and Eve as described in the book of Genesis:

And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat 1

Thus, from the biblical point of view from the time the Adam and Eve were created in the Garden of Eden. God said, "Adam!" Adam said, "Eve." And, Eve said, "The serpent.!" Thus began the pattern of blaming others.

Determinism is important in Christian theology. One of the basic tenets of traditional Christian theology is that god is Omniscient and Omnipotent, and that every human action is foreordained by God. This doctrine seemingly precludes the existence of human free will.

Because morality, duty, and the avoidance of sin are also basic elements in Christian teaching, how, it is asked, can people be morally responsible once predestination is accepted? Many attempts have been made by theologians to explain this paradox. Saint Augustine (350–430), the great Father and Doctor of the Church, firmly believed in predestination, holding that only those elected by God would attain salvation; no one however knows who is among the elect, and therefore all should lead God-fearing, religious lives.

The celebrated French bishop and pulpit orator; Jacques Bossuet (1627–1704) offered another approach, which became widely held; he stated that free will and divine foreknowledge are certain truths that must be accepted even though they are not logically connected. (Extracted from Encyclopedia of Encarta)

2) Islam

Mainly two doctrines; Ash'ari and Mo'tazeli. The mainstream of Sunni Muslim follow the Ash'ari school of thought which is more on determinism. Mo'tazelists in turn believe in absolute free will.

Abu-Ishaq Esfrayeni (who believed in free will) met Qadhi Abdul-jabbar (who believed in determinism) and told him: "Glory to He who is free from committing a sin". Meaning as a determinist you hold god responsible for all the sins.

Qadhi turned around and told him with no hesitation: "Glory to he who nothing happens in his kingdom but what He Wills.!"

Philosophical Justification

If all people have is an illusion of behavioral choice, if people are just machines behaving in the only way they can, then what about personal responsibility? How can we hold people responsible for and punish them for their behaviors if they have no choice in how they behave?

Prof. Daniel Dennett (lecturer at Tufts University in the USA) in his book 'Elbow Room' gives a two part answer to this question. First, we hold people responsible for their actions because we know from historical experience that this is an effective means to make people behave in a socially acceptable way.

Second, holding people responsible only works when combined with the fact that people can be informed of the fact that they are being held responsible and respond to this state of affairs by controlling their behavior so as to avoid punishment. People who break the rules set by society and get punished may be behaving in the only way they can, but if we did not hold them accountable for their actions, people would behave even worse than they do with the threat of punishment.

This is a totally utilitarian approach to the issue of responsibility.

Paradoxes of Freedom in a logical argument

There is No Moral Responsibility

Premise 1: Every action is either **caused** or **uncaused** (i.e. a random occurrence).

Premise 2: If an action is caused (recall Darrow), then that action was not chosen freely and the person who performed that action is not morally responsible for what he/she has done.

Premise 3: If an action is uncaused (i.e. is a random occurrence), then the person who performed that action is not morally responsible for what he/she has done.

Thus, we are not morally responsible for what we do!

Norman Swartz

The reality is that modern philosophy has failed to suggest any convincing answer to the paradox and at the end, they have reached the same conclusion as the average man on the street if not worse than that, as some like Dennett suggest at the end that we have no real behavioral choices, but we continue to behave as if we do! Or to say: God has not revealed it to us yet. Grin and bare it until I solve the paradox for you.

The common mistake of thinkers in the paradox of free will and determinism is that the assumed free will is equal to chaos and if free will accepted then people become totally unpredictable and chaos reigns. And also if the action is caused then the action was not chosen freely. Thus, Swartz put the 2nd premise of the argument in the paradox of freedom.

As I will explain further in this chapter, we agree with the law of cause and effect and that every action is caused, and that the person is also responsible for his/her action without any contradiction involved. For his freedom of will is one of the factors as well.

Epistemic Determinism (The problem of foreknowledge)

The following is the standard argument for epistemic determinism. It alleges to show that foreknowledge is incompatible with free will.

1) Secular version:

☞ *If x knows that you are going to do (some action) A, then you must do A.*

☞ *But if you must do A, then you have no choice in the matter.*

☞ *Thus if x knows (beforehand) what you are going to do, then you have no free choice.*

foreknowledge is incompatible with free will.

2) Theist version:

- God is Omniscient.

- If God is Omniscient, then I must choose what God knows I am going to choose.

Thus: I'm not truly choosing.

Conclusion

- If I'm not choosing, then I'm not morally responsible for my deeds.

- Believing in Omniscient God leads to the *deterrence theory of punishment and praise*.

Discovering the Fallacy

1. Knowledge about the past:

'Imam Ali (a.s) was murdered by Ibn Moljam.'

Today I ask: Who killed Imam Ali (a.s)?

Mr. A: Shemer

Mr. B: Ma'moon

Ms. K: Ibn Moljam

Ms. D: Wahshi

Did Ms. K's asserting a truth today somehow or other 'FORCE' Ibn Moljam to kill Imam Ali?!

Obviously not.

2. Knowledge about the future:

‘Imam Ali (a.s) was murdered by Ibn Moljam.’

In the year 10 AH I ask: Who will kill Imam Ali?

Mr. J : Shemer

Mr. M: Ibn Moljam

Ms. C: Ma'moon

Ms. D: Jo'deh

Will Mr. M's asserting a truth in the year 10 AH somehow or other 'FORCE' Ibn Moljam to kill Imam Ali?!

Obviously not.

3. Natural Laws:

‘There will be a lunar eclipse on 30 December 2001.’

Today (10 August 2001) I ask:

“When will be the next lunar eclipse in Australia?”

Mr. A: Oct. 12

Mr. B: Dec. 30

Mr. C: Dec. 25

Mr. D: Nov. 1

Will Mr. B's asserting a truth today about the lunar eclipse somehow or other 'FORCE' the eclipse to occur?!

Obviously not.

Descriptive Laws & Prescriptive Laws

- Natural Laws are Descriptive.
- Moral & Religious Laws are Prescriptive.

Fallacy Discovered

(It must be that) if X knows that I'm going to do A, then I must do A.

Answer:

- It is not true that if X knows that I'm going to do A, then I must do A.
- I will do A whether X knows about it or not.
- X's knowledge is not the cause of my doing A.

Conclusion

- Foreknowledge no more 'forces' the future to be a certain way, than true reports in history books 'force' the past to have been a certain way.
- Free will is compatible with believing in Omniscient God.
- Man is determined to have free will and hence, responsible for his/her deeds.

Compatibility of Determinism & Free Will

Points:

- 1) The law of cause and effect is a universal law both in the physical world and in human behaviour. Denying this law is equal to chaos and accident, which results in no law and reality in the world.
- 2) Man has a behavioral choice and every healthy person feels this naturally. Hence, even Darrow expects a high praise. Whereas, if his clients were not to be blamed due to deterministic factors, he is not to be praised for the same reason!
- 3) There is no correlation between the law of cause and effect and man's determinism, rather if there is no law of cause and effect man cannot have any freedom of choice. On the other hand, there is no correlation between chaos and man's freedom of choice. If there is no cause for human behaviours, then it random occurs which means the human himself also has no control or power over his actions. Then, where is his freedom of choice?

Free Will & Determinism in the Quran

- Satan; the founder of Determinism: 7:16
- Determinism; the excuse of infidels: 6:148

- A myth called 'Predestination' 8:53
- Man's free will: A Quranic Principle: 18:29
- A Myth called: Societal Determinism:
 - The magicians of Pharaoh: 20:70-72
 - The wife of Pharaoh: 66: 11
 - The son of Noah: 11: 46

If predestination, then...

- Why do we sometimes regret the past?
- Why do we blame the evil-doers?
- Why do we praise the righteous ones?
- Why do we educate our children?
- Why do we strive for moral values?
- Why do we repent?
- Why do we judge the criminals?
- Why do we punish the criminals?
- Why do we protest to transgressors?
- Why do we feel sorrow or happy about the past?

For Further Study

- Man & Destiny: The late Ayatollah Motahari
- Talab Wa Eradeh: The late Imam Khomeini
- Elbow Room: Dr. Daniel C. Dennett
- Free Will and Determinism: Dr. Norman Swartz
- The Foundations of Morality (Chapter 27) : Henry Hazlitt

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<https://www.al-islam.org/ultimate-questions-philosophy-religion-shaykh-mansour-leghaei/chapter-12-einsteins-paradox>

Links

[1] <http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/swartz/freewill1.htm>