FIVE PHILOSPHERS ON FREE WILL

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**Abstract**

Over the past 2500 years, the case for and against free will has been debated by some of the most brilliant minds in ancient and modern history. This paper discusses landmark theories and comparative views by five well-known philosophers. One definition of free will states it is an innate characteristic possessed by human beings. However, in juxtaposition to this assertion, causal determinism affirms that free will is limited or does not exist. Philosophical arguments are presented by: Plato, Hobbes, Hume, Leibniz, and Hegel. Some include philosophical and theological tenets, whereas, others are devoid of theology. During the Age of Enlightenment, established moral behavior and ethical standards were central to the case against free will. Hegel’s theory on “the freeing of the Will” connects the evolution of the universe with the human quest for self-realization.

**Introduction**

In essays by world-renowned philosophers such as Aristotle, Philo, Aquinas, Spinoza, Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, Mill, and Kant, there is little support for the claim that human beings possess free will. However, in the writings of Epicurus, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Herbart, Schopenhauer, and James, there are compelling arguments that lend support (or limited support) to the notion that the Will is free. To summarize the nature of the debate, Hutcheon (1972) offers a concise explanation from a humanist viewpoint:

Is there such a thing as free will? This is a burning question for many humanists who have come to feel that, although their ethical life stance both implies and demands the existence of free will, the conclusions of science cast doubt on that very possibility. The dilemma is not new. The "free will-determinism" issue has been key to philosophical discourse in every age, if only because the justice systems of all civilized societies have always been based on the proposition that individuals are responsible for their own behaviour. In the end, the position on free will taken by most people in every historical era has come down to their beliefs about the nature of causality: beliefs implied by the world view prevalent at the time. Modern notions about the nature of causality tend to come from one of three sources: (1) the philosophical dualism justifying most of the world’s religious belief systems, which defines the human as different in kind from other aspects of nature -- and thus not subject to nature’s regularities as discovered by science; (2) the mechanistic determinism underlying the world view apparently warranted by the theory and evidence from physics concerning the nature of reality; and (3) the "sovereign ego", anti-science type of non-determinism propounded by the Existentialists.

To begin a discussion on the topic of free will, a working definition is needed. According to *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2011):

“Free Will” is a philosophical term of art for a particular sort of capacity of rational agents to choose a course of action from among various alternatives. Philosophers have debated this question for over two millennia, and just about every major philosopher has had something to say about it. Most philosophers suppose that the concept of free will is very closely connected to the concept of moral responsibility. Acting with free will, on such views, is just to satisfy the metaphysical requirement on being responsible for one's action. Clearly, there will also be epistemic conditions on responsibility as well, such as being aware—or failing that, being culpably unaware—of relevant alternatives to one's action and of the alternatives' moral significance. But the significance of free will is not exhausted by its connection to moral responsibility. Free will also appears to be a condition on desert for one's accomplishments, as in why sustained effort and creative work are praiseworthy; on the autonomy and dignity of persons; and on the value we accord to love and friendship. (“Free Will,” 2011)

It is important to know if human beings are making choices according to their moral beliefs. Such beliefs become “causes” that set “actions” into motion. Consequently, actions create “effects” in the lives of individuals. Accordingly, if moral beliefs are causing individuals to act, then certain preconditions exist to produce specific outcomes.

Therefore, if preconditions create causes that lead to decisions and behaviors, then the unconditional freedom associated with free will is in jeopardy. Thus, the stakes are high for humankind regarding the existence or non-existence of free will. This debate begins during the Golden Age of Greek philosophy.

**Plato**

Plato (429-327 BCE) is among the first Western philosophers to discuss the issue of free will. He offers two opposing theories on whether the Will is free. The first theory states that human beings are free to form their belief systems that provide the conditions or causes necessary for asserting the Will. From Plato’s *Laws*:

Since our king perceived that all our actions have soul in them and contain much virtue and likewise much vice, and that the complex of the soul and body when once it has come to be, though not eternal, is, like the gods recognized by law, imperishable – for there would be no procreation of living creatures with either of the pair destroyed – and since he considered that ’tis ever the nature of such soul as is good to work blessing and of such as is evil to work harm – since he saw all this, I say, he contrived where to post each several item so as to provide most utterly, easily, and well for the triumph of virtue and rout of vice throughout the whole. Thus he has contrived to this universal end the seat or regions which must receive either type of soul as it is formed in their inhabitants, but the causes of the formation of either type he left free to our individual volitions. For as a man’s desires tend, and as is the soul that conceives them, so and such, as a general rule, does every one of us come to be. (904a-c, 1999)

By positing that the formation of a cause is a free decision of the individual’s Will, Plato lends credence to the notion that free will exists. Thus, he is claiming that individuals may change their decisions according to the shifting nature of their belief systems. Furthermore, this theory speaks of the soul’s ability to “transform ideas” which leads to different outcomes in the future. Additionally, Plato utilizes the phrase “law of destiny” to describe a different (or right) outcome, which infers a type of predestination or fate. However, in this case, the word “destiny” connotes a godly, virtuous path for the individual who lives in harmony with “The Good.”

In *Laws*, Plato believes that moral choices (as causes) are necessary for the soul to achieve a heavenly state in the afterlife. This type of “freely chosen” morality provides divine causes for the progression of the soul:

Thus all things that have part in soul change, for the cause of change lies within themselves, and as they change they move in accord with the ordinance and law of destiny. If their changes of character are unimportant and few, they are transferred over the surface of the soil; if they are more and in the direction of grave wickedness, they fall into the depths and the so-called underworld the region known by the name of Hades and the like appellations, which fill the fancy of the quick and departed alike with dreams of dismay. If a soul have drunk still deeper of vice or virtue, by reason of its own volition and the potent influence of past converse with others, when near contact with divine goodness has made it especially godlike, so surely is it removed to a special place of utter holiness, and translated to another and better world, or, in the contrary case, transported to live in the opposite realm. (904c-d, 1999)

Plato second theory refers to the individual’s volition for improving or degrading the quality of the afterlife experience. In this sense, free will represents the “seat of discernment” for achieving a high degree of moral integrity or for allowing submission to wrongdoing. Thus, Plato’s second theory, offers limited support for the existence of free will. According to Magill, (1990), Plato argues that free will exists when individuals freely choose to change their moral beliefs, however, unless changed, prior moral beliefs will continue to provide direct causes for the exertion of Will. Therefore, according to Plato’s second theory, a mindset with pre-existing beliefs or causes will determine an individual’s future decisions. Accordingly, this discussion leads to an exploration of causal determinism which refutes the concept of free will.

**Leibniz and Determinism**

For the purpose of comparing Plato’s views of free will with philosophical theories of determinism, it is prudent to begin with a working definition from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2011):

The roots of the notion of determinism surely lie in a very common philosophical idea: the idea that everything can, in principle, be explained, or that everything that is, has a sufficient reason for being and being as it is, and not otherwise. In other words, the roots of determinism lie in what Leibniz named the Principle of Sufficient Reason. But since precise physical theories began to be formulated with apparently deterministic character, the notion has become separable from these roots. Philosophers of science are frequently interested in the determinism or indeterminism of various theories, without necessarily starting from a view about Leibniz' Principle. Since the first clear articulations of the concept, there has been a tendency among philosophers to believe in the truth of some sort of determinist doctrine. (“Causal Determinism,” 2011)

Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) is among the first philosophers to assemble a cogent theory of determinism. He posits that a reason (or cause) must exist for anything and everything to be, or to occur (Magill, 1990). Leibniz’s theory on determinism does not allow for changes of moral beliefs and is bound by cause and effect. However, Leibniz (like Plato) refers to the soul as “the storehouse of all knowledge” (1990). He differs from Plato by asserting that the soul evolves over time, but whatever course the soul chooses is predetermined. Thus, Leibniz is espousing a determinist theory on human behavior by claiming that the soul is predictable:

So the present is big with the future, the future could have been read in the past, and distant things are expressed in what is nearby. What is folded into any individual soul will become perceptible only through time, as the soul develops; but if we could unfold it all at once right now, we could see the beauty of the universe in the individual soul—any individual soul. But as each of the soul’s distinct perceptions involves an infinity of confused perceptions that take in the entire universe, the soul itself doesn’t know the things of which it has a perception except insofar the perception is distinct and conspicuous; and the extent to which a soul has distinct perceptions is the extent to which it is perfect. Every soul knows infinity—knows everything—but knows it in a confused way. It is like what happens when I walk along the seashore: in hearing the roar of the sea, I hear—though without distinguishing them—the individual little noises of the waves out of which that total noise is made up. Similarly, our big confused perceptions are the outcome of the infinity of tiny impressions that the whole universe makes on us. It is the same for each monad. Only God has distinct knowledge of everything, as he is the source of everything. It has been well said that it’s as though God were like a centre that is everywhere, with a circumference nowhere, because to him everything is immediately present, at no distance from that Centre. (“Principles of,” 2006)

Leibnitz and Plato believe that the soul unfolds and gains wisdom, compassion, and an appreciation of beauty. Additionally, they both combine philosophy and theology by speaking about the soul’s connection to the Godhead. However, despite Leibniz’s beliefs in spiritual phenomena, he theorizes that free will does not exist. Instead, he contends that reality is causal, and every event has a reason for occurring in the life of an individual (Magill, 1990). Since Leibnitz grounded his theory in theology, he does not receive recognition as the originator of causal determinism.

**Thomas Hobbes**

Hobbes (1588-1679) dismisses theological assumptions about God and the soul and reduces human experience to the world of matter and motion. From his article, “Liberty and Necessity” (1654/1999) Hobbes explains his theory of determinism:

I conceive when a man deliberates whether he shall do a thing or not do it, that he does nothing else but consider whether it be better for himself to do it or not to do it. And to consider an action is to imagine the consequences of it, both good and evil. From whence is to be inferred, that deliberation is nothing else but alternate imagination of the good and evil sequels of an action, or, which is the same thing, alternate hope and fear, or alternate appetite to do or quit the action of which he deliberateth. I conceive that in all deliberations, that is to say, in all alternate succession of contrary appetites, the last is that which we call the will and is immediately next before the doing of the action, or next before the doing of it become impossible. All other appetites to do, and to quit, that come upon a man during his deliberations, are called intentions and inclinations, but not wills, there being but one will which also in this case may be called the last will, though the intentions change often. I conceive that those actions, which a man is said to do upon deliberation, are said to be voluntary, and done upon choice and election, so that voluntary action, and action proceeding from election is the same thing; and that of a voluntary agent, it is all one to say, he is free, and to say, he hath not made an end of deliberating.

Since Hobbes was an atheist, it is reasonable to assume that he did not struggle with theological issues while explaining his views on determinism. His contention that individuals only do what is in their best interests is contrary to the Christian principle of “love thy neighbor.” Hobbes states that human beings are self-centered, and their actions are set in motion by impulses to satisfy their desires (Magill, 1990). If individuals are behaving according to the dictates of self-gratification, then Hobbes reasons that free will does not exist. Thus, human beings are corporeal beings in a material world where every event has a cause with a determined outcome. Only when individuals understand the constraints of moral conditioning are they able to feel any sense of freedom. In the next section, Hume builds upon Hobbes’s theory of causal determinism which negates the existence of free will.

**David Hume**

David Hume (1711 – 1776) focuses on the predictability of human behavior and assumes that all actions find motivation through instinct and passion, but not through reason (Magill, 1990). He states that individuals are morally responsible for their actions and should be rewarded or punished based on their actions (Reese, 1996). By utilizing punishment as a deterrent for immoral actions, it is more desirable to act in a moral manner. Hume believes that individuals possess reason, but “reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (Reese, 1990).

Hume sets himself in opposition to most moral philosophers, ancient and modern, who talk of the combat of passion and reason, and who urge human beings to regulate their actions by reason and to grant it dominion over their contrary passions. He claims to prove that “reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will,” and that reason alone “can never oppose passion in the direction of the will.” His view is not, of course, that reason plays no role in the generation of action; he grants that reason provides information, in particular about means to our ends, which makes a difference to the direction of the will. His thesis is that reason alone cannot move us to action; the impulse to act itself must come from passion. The doctrine that reason alone is merely the “slave of the passions,” i.e., that reason pursues knowledge of abstract and causal relations solely in order to achieve passions' goals and provides no impulse of its own, is defended in the *Treatise of Human Nature*. (“Hume’s Moral,” 2010)

In summary, Hume theorizes that human beings are under the control of their passions and desires. These innate or acquired cravings provide the impetus for causation, which will produce determined outcomes. Accordingly, Hume does not support the notion of free will because human passions become the causes for every human action. However, many modern philosophers view Hobbes and Hume as “compatibilists” (Magill, 1990) because they do not deny that individuals are free to choose while driven by forces of instinct and passion (Magill, 1990). Therefore, individuals are free to assert their Will, but causal determinism will always lead to a predictable outcome.

**Hegel**

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1870-1831) posits that the universe and everything in it is evolving (Magill, 1990). As the universe progresses, its potential is unfolding until it reaches full expression. Correspondingly, human beings evolve and experience a process of self-realization over time. The universe and human beings are in a “state of becoming” like seedlings blossoming into flowers.

Hegel accepts the concept of the Godhead as the cause of reason within the cosmos, and therefore, his philosophy overlaps with a theology. He argues in favor of free will based on spiritual ideals. According to Hegel (1898):

Secular life is the positive and definite embodiment of the Spiritual Kingdom—the Kingdom of the Will manifesting itself in outward existence. Mere impulses are also forms in which the inner life realizes itself; but these are transient and disconnected; they are the ever-changing applications of volition. But that which is just and moral belongs to the essential, independent, intrinsically universal Will; and if we would know what Right really is, we must abstract from inclination, impulse and desire as the particular; i.e., we must know what the Will is in itself. For benevolent, charitable, social impulses are nothing more than impulses— to which others of a different class are opposed. What the Will is in itself can be known only when these specific and contradictory forms of volition have been eliminated. Then Will appears as Will, in its abstract essence. The Will is Free only when it does not will anything alien, extrinsic, foreign to itself (for as long as it does so, it is dependent), but wills itself alone—wills the Will. This is absolute Will —the volition to be free. Will making itself its own object is the basis of all Right and Obligation—consequently of all statutory determinations of Right, categorical imperatives, and enjoined obligations. The Freedom of the Will per se, is the principle and substantial basis of all Eight—is itself absolute, inherently eternal Right, and the Supreme Right in comparison with other specific Rights; nay, it is even that by which Man becomes Man, and is therefore the fundamental principle of Spirit.

Hegel posits that for the Will to be free, the individual must eliminate any causes or conditions that are affecting the state of the Will. He speaks about purifying the Will from conditioned ideas upon which the Will has become dependent. When the individual eliminates cultural and societal conceptual dependencies, the Will is free to evolve in consciousness.

Hegel believes “freedom of the Will” is a form of human progress which is collectively an endgame for humankind. Individuals are free to understand the nature of the universe by achieving this realization, and consequently, they will know the truth about themselves. Hegel believes that individuals have the potential to free the Will, which will allows them to reach full realization as human beings (in tandem with the evolution of the universe).

**Conclusion**

Since the Golden Age of Greek philosophy, a voluminous amount of literature has been written on free will. Plato, Leibniz, Hobbes, Hume, and Hegel were important contributors to the advancement of scholarly discourse on the nature of free will. However, many other philosophers including Spinoza, Kant, Descartes, Schopenhauer, etc. have written extensively on this topic.

A major shift in philosophical thought occurs when Hobbes writes about conditioned moral beliefs as the primary cause that negates free will. Subsequently, Hume advances Hobbes’s theories, and causal determinism gains momentum through the Age of Enlightenment and continues to the present day.

Plato offers a dual theory on free will, the first supporting its existence, and the second offering limited support based on moral conditions. In most philosophical Greek writings, there are limits to free will because it is dependent on: 1) moral behavior, 2) acquiring knowledge, and 3) reaping the rewards of a heavenly afterlife. Additionally, there are similarities between the Greek and Christian theologies, whereby, individuals set various causes in motion during their lifetimes, and corresponding effects are waiting for them in the afterlife. Therefore, causation is the force behind “the choosing” of moving toward The Good or away from it.

Leibniz provides the initial intellectual spark for challenging the concept of free will. He believes that human beings know what they want and endeavor to attain it. He posits that Will is a force that propels the individual toward achieving personal goals based on moral beliefs. Leibnitz states that free will does not exist because human beings are simply choosing to pursue their desires based on conditioned thinking. Therefore, individuals are constantly “willing” into their experience the passions and desires they are craving at any given moment.

Hobbes and Hume progress the argument for causal determinism. They believe that compatibility between casual determinism and free will is a possibility, if one accepts the position that actions spring from conditions or causes. As such, the Will is free to choose beliefs, but actions occur because of the beliefs chosen.

Hegel defines free will in correspondence to Taoist teachings. Hegel (1827) lectured on this topic and spoke of self-realization among Taoists who “sought to bring to consciousness what the true might be” (“Hegel On,” 2010). Hegel understood the tenets of Taoism which supports the concept of free will. Other Eastern religions support “freedom of the Will” including Buddhism, Zen, Hinduism, Vedanta, and Shinto.

In summary, there is no method for proving that free will does or does not exist. Most scholars argue against free will. However, once theology enters the debate; the spiritual phenomena of the Godhead and the soul alter the dynamics of the argument. When personal faith enters the discussion, the reasoning principle of philosophy is no longer applicable. Such a debate is fueled by religious beliefs and emotions; not by rationale or logic. Therefore, engaging in philosophical discourse is a prudent method of discussing free will as an academic discipline.

For students finding an interest in this debate, the next step is to examine theories by published philosophers and divide them into accepted categories on topics in free will. In most cases, the terms *compatibilists, incompatibilists* and *impossibilists* are utilized when identifying a philosopher’s position. Compatibilists believe that free will and determinism are mutually valid; both are necessary for logical consistency. Incompatibilists are determinists, who contend that free will is incompatible with determinism. Impossibilists dismiss free will as unrealizable or impractical.

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