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. In juxtaposition, causal determinism affirms that free will is limited or does not exist. Philosophical arguments are presented by Plato, Hobbes, Hume, Leibniz, and Hegel. Some theories include philosophical and theological tenets, while others are devoid of theology. During the Age of Enlightenment, established morals and ethics 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.

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. (“Free Will,” 2011)

It is important to examine whether human beings are making choices according to their moral beliefs. Such beliefs are “causes” that set “actions” into motion and create “effects.” Preconditions form moral beliefs that produce specific outcomes. Such outcomes find expression through decisions and behaviors. Consequently, if this sequence of cause and effect is valid, then the central issue of “unconditional freedom of Will” is in jeopardy (Magill, 1990). Therefore, the stakes are high regarding whether human beings are free to assert the Will or are simply acting in accordance with preconditioned beliefs. This debate begins during the Golden Age of Greek philosophy.

**Plato**

Plato (429-327 BCE) is among the first Western philosophers to discuss free will. He offers two opposing theories on this topic. His first theory states that human beings are free to form belief systems, which create 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. He is also claiming that individuals may change their decisions according to the shifting nature of their beliefs. This theory speaks of the soul’s ability to “transform ideas” which lead to different outcomes. Plato utilizes the phrase “law of destiny” to describe the “right” outcome that infers 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 contends that moral choices 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’s second theory focuses on 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 either achieving integrity or condescending to wrongdoing. Thus, Plato’s second theory offers limited support for the existence of free will.

Plato argues that free will exists when individuals freely choose to change their moral beliefs. However, unless such beliefs change, the preconditions that underlie moral constructs will continue to provide causes for exertion of Will (Magill, 1990). Thus, a mindset with pre-existing beliefs will determine an individual’s path in life. This discussion leads to an exploration of causal determinism which refutes the concept of free will.

**Leibniz and Determinism**

It is necessary to begin with a working definition of *determinism* (*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. (“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 must exist for anything and everything to occur (Magill, 1990). Leibniz’s theory of determinism does not allow for changes in moral beliefs and is bound by cause and effect. Leibniz, in like manner to Plato, refers to the soul as “the storehouse of all knowledge” (1990). However, he differs from Plato by asserting that whatever course the soul chooses is predetermined. Leibniz espouses a determinist theory of 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. (“Principles of,” 2006).

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

**Thomas Hobbes**

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

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.

As an atheist, Hobbes does not speak of theological issues in his essays on determinism. He proposes that individuals only act in their best interests, which runs counter 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 behave according to the dictates of self-gratification, then Hobbes contends free will does not exist. Consequently, human beings are living in a material world where every event has a cause with a predetermined outcome. Only when individuals realize the constraints of moral conditioning will they feel any sense of freedom. In the next section, Hume builds on Hobbes’s theory of causal determinism.

**David Hume**

David Hume (1711 – 1776) focuses on the predictability of human behavior and theorizes that actions find motivation through instinct and passion – not reason (Magill, 1990). He states that individuals are morally responsible for their actions and are rewarded or punished accordingly (Reese, 1996). When society utilizes punishment as a deterrent for immoral behavior, it is more desirable to act in a virtuous manner.

Hume contends 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.” (“Hume’s Moral,” 2010)

In summary, Hume suggests that human beings are under the control of their passions and desires. These acquired cravings provide the impetus for causation, which produces determined outcomes. Thus, Hume does not support the notion of free will. However, Hume and Hobbes are referred to as *compatibilists*, who do not deny *free choice* as a human characteristic that is driven by instinct and passion (Magill, 1990).

**Hegel**

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1870-1831) posits that everything in the universe is part of an evolutionary process (Magill, 1990). As the universe progresses, its potential unfolds until it reaches full expression. Correspondingly, human beings are evolving and experiencing a process of self-realization. Thus, the universe and human beings are in a “state of becoming” like seedlings blossoming into flowers (1990). Hegel accepts the Godhead as the cause of reason within the cosmos, and therefore, his philosophy includes theology. He argues in favor of free will based on spiritual ideals. According to Hegel (1898):

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 by which Man becomes Man, and is therefore the fundamental principle of Spirit.

For the Will to be free, human beings must eliminate preconditions. Purification of the Will is achieved by deconstructing false ideas and dogma. When the individual is no longer bound by cultural and societal dependencies, the Will is free to evolve in consciousness (Hegel, 1898).

Hegel posits that “freedom of the Will” is achieved through spiritual progress, which raises the consciousness of humankind. Those individuals who aspire to attain self-realization are “free willing” to learn the truth about themselves. Therefore, Hegel supports the potential for free will through the continuing evolution of humanity and the universe.

**Conclusion**

Since the Golden Age of Greek philosophy, an abundant 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 this topic. However, many other philosophers have written extensively on free will including Spinoza, Kant, Descartes, and Schopenhauer.

Plato offers two theories on free will. The first supports its validity, and the second offers limited support based on changing moral beliefs. In most Greek writings, there are limits to free will based on: 1) learning morals and ethics, 2) acquiring knowledge, and 3) anticipating the rewards of a heavenly afterlife. Similarities between the Greek and Christian theologies are evident as individuals set causes in motion with an expectation of experiencing corresponding effects in the afterlife. Therefore, the “choosing” of specific causes either moves individuals toward “The Good” (or God) or shifts them away from these spiritual ideals.

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

Hobbes and Hume progress the argument for causal determinism. They believe that compatibility between determinism and free will is a possibility, but only if preconditions exist. Accordingly, the Will freely chooses moral beliefs and subsequent behaviors, decisions, and outcomes are within the confines of causal determinism.

Hegel (1927) defines free will in correspondence with Taoist teachings. He speaks of self-realization among those who “sought to bring to consciousness - what the truth might be” (“Hegel On,” 2010). Hegel argues that the tenets of Taoism support the concept of free will. Additionally, the teachings of most other Eastern religions include “freedom of the Will.”

 In summary, there is no method for proving free will exists or does not exist. Most scholars argue against free will, however, once theology enters the debate in favor of free will; the spiritual concepts of the Godhead and soul alter the dynamics of the argument. If personal faith enters the discussion, the reasoning principle of philosophy loses the power of logic. Therefore, engaging in philosophical discourse and basing arguments in rationale keeps the discussion within the parameters of philosophy.

For students finding an interest in this subject, one suggestion is to examine theories by well-known philosophers and divide them into categories based on philosophical nomenclature. In most cases, the terms *compatibilists, incompatibilists* and *impossibilists* are utilized when identifying a philosopher’s position on free will. Compatibilists believe that free will and determinism offer logical consistency. Incompatibilists are determinists who contend that free will does not exist. Impossibilists dismiss free will as an unrealizable or impractical concept.

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