

How our duties and responsibility affect our free will, determinism, and compatib...

[Philosophy](#)



Whether our actions are free, predetermined, or both is a topic that has been a widely debated and still remains unclear today. Is the relationship between our actions and responsibility accurately described by determinism, compatibilism, or free will? Analyzing the nature and implications of both free will and determinism reveals that neither one of the two completely accounts for all of our actions. We are not completely free when making our decisions because everything is a chain of cause and effect, with every decision being influenced by some internal and external cause. And yet the human mind does not function exclusively in an instinctive or reflexive (completely determined) manner. Therefore, compatibilism is the most accurate explanation because it is a balance between determinism and free will, since it states that both are possible simultaneously and that we have varying amounts of control over specific actions.

Proponents of free will believe that human beings are in complete control of their actions and choices. An action is considered free when the person could have chosen otherwise. According to free will, while the physical world is deterministic, the mental world is not. Though both the physical and mental worlds operate by a chain of cause and effect where one event leads to another, free will argues that in the mental regard, we are free to choose those causes.

John Locke was one of the early European philosophers to explore free will. Though he believed in freedom of choice, he stated that " I think the question is not proper, whether the will be free, but whether a man be free." This means that the will may indeed be determined, but the person to whom it belongs is free because, despite the influences on their will, they still have <https://assignbuster.com/how-our-duties-and-responsibility-affect-our-free-will-determinism-and-compatibilism/>

the freedom to make decisions. We have reasons for making specific choices but we still are exercising our freedom when we chose one thing over another. Factors such as social or biological circumstance or past events can “ influence the making of a choice, but do not determine it.”

Jean Paul Sartre further elaborates on this in his writings that focus on absolute freedom. Sartre asserts that without a god or any idealized set of characteristics (human nature) to determine how we should behave, human beings are absolutely free in creating their lives and identities. He believes in complete freedom and therefore complete responsibility. While Locke states that the causes which influence our choices are determined and the choices are free, Sartre goes even further, claiming that the causes are also free. Sartre argues that that the internal influences we experience are actually also choices and are therefore free will. We choose to have certain values, beliefs, and temperaments that we are influenced by. A factor is only able to influence our choices because we chose to make it significant enough to do so. For example, when thinking about jumping off a bridge, one’s decision would probably be influenced by the fact that they have family and friends whom they don’t want to leave. That is an influence, but it is only an influence because one chooses to value their friends and family. It is because of this choice that this factor is able to influence them not to jump. We chose the values that influence us. We have the freedom to generate our causes and motivations.

But how can we be sure if we are actually free to choose the causes behind our actions? Determinism opposes free will by arguing that when making a

decision, humans will chose to be influenced by the reason that seems the most compelling. Though we are choosing that reason, we are choosing it not because of free will, but because it is the best option given our current situation. Therefore, this choice was determined. Anyone who says, “ I have free will because I can chose to do anything I want!” needs to ask themselves “ But, what makes me want?” Additionally, determinism states that the universe is structured in such a way that only one course of action or one choice is possible at a given time. The large multitude of factors that goes into making a decision is precisely so that only that particular decision is possible. The resulting decision could not have been different without changing one of the factors that led to it.

Everything we do is dictated by internal or external influences. Typically, external influence is understood to be something physical while internal influence is known as influence that is mental and unable to be seen. However, once we start investigating the separation of the physical and mental worlds, the distinction between the two becomes increasingly unclear. This is where reductionism comes in to make its point.

Reductionists are determinists who argue that our mental process consists of just the brain. The brain is an organ and is physical. This means that our thinking and decision making can be reduced and are therefore part of the physical world. The physical world is deterministic, then so is our decision making process. Therefore, we have no free will. But why does it feel like we do? Why does it feel like some of the choices we make are completely free and we could have chosen otherwise? Determinists say it’s because we

cannot see the decision making process that takes place in our brain the same way we see the chain of cause and effect in the external world. Sometimes, we are not even aware of the factors that influence our decisions, so we are led to believe that we made that choice freely and without influence.

Given this reductionist view, can we not conclude that no one is truly responsible for their actions since they are physical and determined?

Somehow, that conclusion feels incorrect. It seems ridiculous to say that we are never really justified in holding someone responsible for their actions. It would be wrong to let criminals go free because their crimes were caused by their physical brain. This has been a source of major debate and uncertainty in both philosophy and the justice system. We can't not punish people but at the same time we don't know exactly how to determine how much punishment someone truly deserves.

Compatibilism is a philosophy that reconciles free will and determinism.

Compatibilists believe that although everything is determined, we can still call an action free if that determination comes from within ourselves instead of from the external world. For example, jumping off a diving board instead of being pushed is considered a free action. Both jumping and being pushed are actions that were determined, but one of them was determined within the brain and therefore it is considered free. Moreover, compatibilism states that determinism and free will are possible simultaneously, meaning that an action can be attributed to a mix of free and predetermined factors and is

not purely one or the other. We have varying levels of control over specific actions.

Some compatibilists even hold that determinism is necessary for free will, arguing that choice involves preference for one course of action over another, requiring a sense of how choices will turn out. Daniel Dennett advocates compatibilism by stating that free will is compatible with determinism because the future is determined but not inevitable. “ We can’t change the future but we can change what we thought it was going to be. Free will is our capacity to see probable futures in time to take steps so that something else happens instead.”

Philosopher Patricia Churchland has written extensively on compatibilism and determining the amount of freedom we have when making decisions. Churchland rejects the free and not-free dichotomy, focusing instead on the amount of control we exercise over different actions. According to Churchland, “...instead of asking ‘ Am I free?’, we should be asking ‘ How much control do I have?’ And the more control we have, the more responsibility we take for our action.” But if we have varying amounts of control, how do we determine the responsibility one takes for a certain action? Exactly how much determinism must an action contain in order to result in punishment? As far as anyone knows, we do not currently have a system for deciding this. We simply assess each case individually and attempt to figure out how influenced the actions were. This is the reason why justice is so complex and difficult to determine.

As compatibilist philosopher Steven Pinker puts it, “ there is a part of our brain that is reflexive or instinctive, but there is also a part of our brain that makes decisions based on a complex neurological system.” The latter is considered to be our free will. It is important to note that this is different from brute, involuntary reflexes, but at the same time, “ it is such a complex process with so many different factors that are involved, that there is going to be some influence on the decisions that are produced.” 4

This implies that we have self control, but we have varying degrees of it. These varying degrees appear to be linked to genetics, as was found in several experiments. A particularly famous one consisted of giving young children the option of either receiving one marshmallow right away, or waiting for several. Some waited patiently while others gave up and chose to take the single marshmallow instead. This proved that the amount of self control people have most likely depends on a mixture of biological and social factors and varies from person to person. However, these findings do not make assigning punishment and responsibility any easier since we have not developed a reliable way of determining how much self control different people have.

Overall, the widespread debate over how much freedom we have in choosing our actions and how responsible we should held be for them reveals the obscure nature of the human will and mind. Perhaps we will never be able to know for certain how much control one has over their actions, or what exactly influenced them to act in that specific manner. It seems wrong to assume that any decisions we make mentally are free because one cannot

deny the existence of factors (whether they are biological, social, or other) that influence the choices we make and thus determine our course of action. But one can also not accept that no one should be held responsible for any action because it was inevitable due to the specific setup of the universe and a specific chain of cause and effect or because it was a product of their physical brain and was therefore determined. Though these claims have value, they are not morally correct.

In order to evaluate human behavior in a manner that provides a suitable way to measure control and responsibility, it is necessary to syncretize determinism and free will. Compatibilism is the most efficient philosophy for explaining choice and freedom because it states that free will and determinism are possible simultaneously, with humans being both affected by predetermined factors and yet still having the ability to make independent choices. Compatibilism is also the most accurate of the three due to the fact that it does not view making decisions as a black and white matter of either being completely free to choose or being completely un-free determined). Compatibilism holds that we have varying amounts of freedom in different situations and asks the more fitting question of how much control we have over certain actions.