

Are humans
responsible for their
own actions?



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The notion of human behaviour is a complex one, there are many factors that intertwine with human behaviour such as the conscious and the subconscious, the voluntary and the involuntary of our actions. The pre-determination of human behaviour is a concept that has been constantly debated. The idea that behaviour is determined in advance suggests that from birth our all our behaviours are set in stone and complete. However, there is a sense of obligation and responsibility that must be taken for the behaviours that one chooses to engage in. Based on predetermination or responsibility for actions, ultimately accountability for actions is what governs human behaviour. The Nature – Nurture debate in terms of behaviour leading to actions is an argument that is used in Psychology to assess whether personal responsibility or predetermination plays a role in behaviour. According to (Tucker-Ladd, 1996), psychological determinism is described as all thoughts and feelings which are inevitable due to the complex psychological laws. This describes the cause and effect relationships in human behaviour. Determinism assumes that forces control actions outside of our control. These forces can be internal or external therefore, behaviour is predictable and controllable. Ultimately, determinism asserts that a person therefore is not responsible for their actions. Through the notion of determinism, it can be argued that a murderer for example, is not responsible for the action of killing someone else. As cited by (Singh, 2014), the court of law the punishment of the accused is not entirely determined by the severity of the crime, but lessened responsibility considers other external factors such as up-bringing and background. In 1924 the American lawyer, Clarence Darrow effectively defended two youths guilty of murder who killed “ for the thrill of it” (Singh, 2014) by centring his

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argument on their lack of moral responsibility. Darrow argued that a combination of heredity and social conditioning impacted their actions. Nevertheless, if a court decides that a murderer cannot be held accountable for his actions, the court serves no purpose as a justice system. If a murder can be dismissed as hereditary then there is no justification for the punishment of any crime. The subject of Free Will is important when engaging whether humans are responsible for the actions that we commit to partake in. The concept of Free Will essentially asserts that humans can act in any manner we choose to without constraints. This is the idea of humans being completely autonomous. Free will is defined as being in control of one's actions (Gross, 2003). According to (Baumeister, 2008), belief in free will does support socially desirable actions, according to Vohs and Schooler (2008, as cited in Baumeister, 2008). They found that participants who had been encouraged to disbelieve in free will were more probable than a control group to cheat on a test. Additionally, further studies by Baumeister, Masicampo, and DeWall (2006, as cited in Baumeister, 2008) using the Vohs-Schooler methods found that encouraging participants to disbelieve in free will made them more aggressive and less helpful toward others. If we combine the cheating, aggression, and helping findings, it seems reasonable to suggest that belief in free will is beneficial to better, more congruous social behaviour. This research provides support for the fact that humans are responsible for their own actions. Using the example above, humans can rationalise and know the difference between right and wrong therefore, the action of cheating a test was done out of free will and of the own accord of the individual. By discouraging Free Will essentially humans are controlled.

However, since as humans we are sentient beings there is a sense of holding accountability for actions.

An external argument utilises free will to exhibit the idea of criminal responsibility is incoherent or unjustifiable and therefore it ought to be abandoned. Cashmore (2010) maintains that as the concept of free will is an illusion, the misconception of the foundation of the criminal justice system will become more apparent. The criminal justice system has adjusted in introducing deterministic defences, ranging from 'not guilty by reason of insanity' to the more recent 'extreme emotional disturbance' defence. Furthermore, determinism does not deteriorate an individuals' capacity for rationality, with rationality being inter-linked with the notion of free will. The defence of extreme emotional disturbance (EED) is an example of how the justice system is adapting to deterministic views. Galperin, Kirschner, and Litwack (2004) analysed cases of all offenders pleading the partial, mitigating defence of EED to charges of intentional murder or attempted premeditated murder in New York County over a period of 10 years between (1988-1997). The cases were examined to determine what influences notable cases that had resulted in the verdict or accepted plea of manslaughter or attempted manslaughter from those cases in which the offender was found guilty, or ultimately pleaded guilty to, the ultimate charge of murder or attempted murder. They found that judges, jurors, and prosecutors were more likely to agree to a defence of EED when the offender's murderous behaviour was driven substantially by a comprehensible fear that they or a loved one would be harmed by the victim than when the offender acted out of anger without fear of physical harm

(Galperin et al., 2004). In this respect, determinism overrides free will and thus, humans do not hold any responsibility of their actions. The main assumption of the humanistic approach is that humans have free will; not all behaviour is determined. Personal agency is the humanistic term for the exercise of free will. Personal agency refers to the choices, the paths that are chosen and their consequences. Free will is much more difficult to measure and test than determinism, therefore making it the less supported belief among Psychologists. Free will can be argued to exist through conscious decision making that are made daily, for example choosing which clothes to wear in the morning. If, as the humanist approach claims, these decisions are all within our free will, then how possibly can this be proven. As of now there is no such proof, Libet (1983, as cited in Clarke, 2013) claimed that even the movement of our own hand is not done out of free will, it is controlled by our brains. This assumption was made after he conducted a study whose results showed that the brain decides to move the hand half a second before we think we have made the decision to do so. Free will is merely an illusion, it is extremely important that humans have it, because without it we feel out of control. Further, if free will is determined by ourselves, then what is the self? Some people claim it is our brain, others our soul and others our entire anatomy, but there is no universally accepted truth. Thus, if we cannot even decide upon what within us is controlling our free will, how can we possibly argue that we have it at all? The emphasis on 'the illusion of conscious will' (Wegner, 2002) has brought research concerning both biological and environmental determinism which could have inferences on the functioning as human beings and the way in which society is governed. One proposed theory, is that of Bargh and Chartrand (1999, as <https://assignbuster.com/are-humans-responsible-for-their-own-actions/>

cited in Smith, 2006) who describes how emotional responses, thoughts and behaviours as being caused and determined by environmental triggers.

These academics propose that there is an instinctive response to external features of the environment in which environmental perception based behaviour with no role played by conscious choice in producing the behaviour. If society were to tolerate such deterministic theories, it would progressively destroy our sense of moral responsibility. Smith (2006) demonstrates this argument by providing the example of road rage.

According to Bargh & Chartrand (1999), we would be determined to become angry by other drivers, and thus would not be responsible for our actions.

Furthermore, if exposure to the driver lead us to physically assault, or to a worse extent to even kill them, the determinism of Bargh & Chartrand's (1999) theory would suggest that the harmed or killed driver is to blame not us. Founded on such concepts, it seems that environmental determinism would pose a threat to the judicial system, which has continuously involved the assumption of free will. Ultimately, moral behaviour is what governs our decisions and the actions that we engage in. However, determinism is taking relevance in our society such as in the justice system. Thus, accountability for actions is not taken. Actions are determined by intentions, Psychology attempts to predict behaviour. If we argue against determinism, in effect we are rejecting the scientific approach to explaining behaviour. A completely deterministic or free will system does not appear suitable when studying human behaviour. Free will is limited since there is limited research in this area due to it being a concept. However, our actions encourage us to take responsibility thus humans must be held responsible.

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