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Free, or Not Free, That is the Question

There are many unsettled problems both today and throughout history that are continually debated, considered, and scrutinized to no avail. Scientists argue over the existence and causes of global warming, countries continue to go to war over what portion of land belongs to who, and different religious groups banter back and forth about who the real God is and what he, she, or it looks like. One of the unsettled problems in the field of metaphysical philosophy is whether or not free will exists for humans. The issue is so prominent that three distinct groups have formed since the beginning of the debate with three equally plausible theories about the existence of free will. While all three groups are able to support their positions, they remain unable to sway the others towards their theory, and therefore all three continue to exist in contrast to one another. One such group upholds the position of hard determinism, basing its conclusions off of the theory of causal determinism, which asserts that all physical actions are caused by preceding conditions. By first analyzing causal determinism the position of hard determinism can then be defined and understood as concluding that free will, defined by hard determinists as uncaused action, cannot exist since all actions are caused. While a plausible theory, there are those who disagree with the hard determinists assertion that free will does not exist based on the idea that the hard determinist definition of free will is incorrect. The compatibilists, for example, define free will as actions caused by one's desires, or any action that is not forced or dictated by outside influences. The hard determinist is able to counter this objection, however, by arguing that even

one's desires are the result of outside causes and therefore are also causally determined, which in turn reiterates that human decisions cannot be made freely. In this way, although it is possible to object to the hard determinist position by asserting that their definition of free will is incorrect, the hard determinist is able to counter this objection and uphold their position using the theory of causal determinism as its evidence to the contrary.

Before the hard determinist position can be fully understood it is important to first illustrate the theory of causal determinism, for it acts as the foundation for hard determinism. Simply stated, causal determinism is the belief that everything exists the way it does due to the exact conditions that came before it, and in turn caused it. Since all occurrences are then determined by and are dependent on the specific conditions that existed before them, it can be concluded by causal determinism that no other outcome except the one that occurred is ever possible. Philosopher Richard Taylor illustrates this idea by pointing out that "Given exactly what went before, the world, it seems, could now be none other than it is. And what it was a moment before... was the consequence of what had gone just before then, and so on, back to the very beginning of the world" (Taylor 136-137). This summarizes the theory of causal determinism as simply stating that since all events are caused by what existed before them there is no possibility for alternative outcomes.

Hard determinism strictly employs the theory of causal determinism in their position, basing their beliefs off of the idea that all physical actions are caused. Taylor sums up the thesis of hard determinism as establishing "that everything, including every cause, is the effect of some cause or causes; or that everything is not only determinate but causally determined" (Taylor 137). Here Taylor introduces the theory that every single thing is caused by something else, even specifying that "every cause" is in turn caused, therefore leaving no room for the idea of

actions taking place purely on their own accord. Hard determinism expands on the theory of causal determinism by applying it beyond just physical aspects of the world and developing it to include human behavior as well. Since human behavior, or the human mind, is a part of each individual human being it can be established that since human bodies are a part of the physical world their minds are a part of the physical world as well. Human behavior originates in the brain, which functions off of a series of neurochemical reactions and is then able to make decisions that will go on to influence the actions of that human. Because all decisions that take place are dependant on the activities of the brain, activities that have been proven to be physical chemical reactions, it is only logical to say that human decisions are themselves physical and are therefore causally determined. Taylor states that since he exists in the world so do "each of the cells and minute parts of which I am composed. The principle of determinism, then, in case it is true, applies to me and to each of those minute parts" (Taylor 137). This illustrates the idea that even one's thoughts are a part of his or her physical being and are therefore subject to the theory of causal determinism.

Upon establishing that human decisions are casually determined the issue of free will arises, for if all human decisions and actions are determined by causes beyond one's control can it still be said that the choices humans make are free? The hard determinist would simply say no, for if everything one does is based off of decisions that they do not control then they cannot be said to have free will. Philosopher James Rachels summarizes the hard determinist position on free will very clearly by providing the following outline of the determinist argument:

- "1. Everything we do is caused by forces over which we have no control.
2. If our actions are caused by forces over which we have no control, we do not act freely.
3. Therefore, we never act freely" (Rachels 478).

Hard determinists believe that all decisions are products of what goes on in the human brain, that the human brain is influenced by neurochemical reactions, and that these reactions are in turn caused by influences outside of the body. Therefore, hard determinists believe that all human decisions are indirectly influenced by causes outside of the body as well. In this way human decisions cannot be made freely by that individual, which then makes free will an impossible occurrence.

An example of this is that of a high school senior deciding whether or not to attend the University of Portland or the University of Southern California. While to this individual senior it may appear as though he or she is free to make any decision they see fit, to the hard determinist the decision is caused by other factors that exist outside of the student's mind. For example, when this student took tours of the schools a series of physical events took place that subconsciously influenced the student's decision. When the student visited USC it was the middle of August in downtown Los Angeles and the sun was beating down and reflecting off of the white concrete that all of the buildings are made out of. The eighty-degree heat provided a hefty percentage of humidity that made the student's hair curl unpleasantly. The humidity caused the student to sweat profusely so that their shoes became slippery which then resulted in a fair amount of painful blisters. Furthermore, upon returning to the hotel after a treacherous drive through the LA ghetto surrounding the campus the student looked in the mirror and was forced to take note of their second-degree sunburn. Regardless of all of these factors the student loved the USC film program and was still considering attending the university in the fall. When the student visited the University of Portland the following April, however, it was a sunny day and the warm wind was blowing on the student's face. The cherry blossoms were in bloom and the air in the academic quad was perfumed with their scent. The college students milled about on

the lazy Saturday afternoon playing Frisbee and reading in the sun and the visiting prefrish could not help but fall in love with the environment of the campus. Based on these two experiences it is clear to the hard determinist that although the student thinks that their decision is free, in reality all of the factors outside of the student's mind will end up causing his or her eventual decision. Since the student had a negative experience at USC his or her brain was most likely reacting negatively while visiting that school. On the other hand, the student's brain was most likely reacting positively to the good experience they had while visiting UP. In this way the hard determinist would contend that his or her decision is causally determined by the environmental conditions on the day that the decision will be based off of. Therefore, the decision is not free, but rather is dependant on outside causes.

One objection to the hard determinist's position is that their definition of free will is incorrect, and therefore they are not able to correctly assess whether or not free will actually exists. Since the hard determinists define free will as uncaused actions they are able to prove, according to their reasoning, that free will does not exist since all actions are caused. However, an opposing position over the philosophical issue of free will, such as the position of compatibilism, would deem this definition as incorrect. The compatibilists would contend, rather, that free will should be defined as decisions caused by one's own desires. Compatibilism agrees with hard determinism when they say that all actions are caused, for it is illogical to imagine that actions could take place spontaneously with no order whatsoever. Compatibilism and hard determinism differ, however, in that the compatibilists believe that free will exists when one has ownership or authorship over his or her actions, and is therefore responsible for them. Rachels states that one's actions that are caused by their desires can be considered "free because your choice is based on your own desires, without anyone else telling you what you must do"

(Rachels 482). In this way compatibilists believe that any action that is not forced upon someone is a free action on their part because they are completely responsible for it. Therefore, the problem with the hard determinist outlook according to the compatibilists is that "whether your behavior is free does not depend on *whether* it is caused; it only depends on *how* it is caused," (Rachels 482). This then leads the compatibilists to believe that they have established their own, correct definition of free will. When looking at the student's college decision as an example, the compatibilists would say that the hard determinists are wrong in asserting that the student is not free in his or her decision. Since the student's parents are not physically forcing him or her to choose one school over the other, according to the compatibilists the choice is completely the student's and the decision that will be made will be a free one.

While the possible objection to the hard determinists' incorrect definition of free will seems plausible, especially to the compatibilists who base their entire position off of this fluke, the hard determinist is not yet defeated. In response to the objection that free will should correctly be defined as action caused by one's own desires, the hard determinist would argue that even one's desires are subject to causal determinism. Therefore, according to the hard determinist, decisions based off of caused desires are also caused by outside influences. Since one's desires are caused it can be concluded by the hard determinist that those desires still remain able to only yield a single outcome, or a single decision, and in turn that decision is not free. Rachels admits this problem with the compatibilists' definition of free will, for while it seems as though one has free will if his or her actions are based on individual desires, "The problem is that our characters and desires are themselves ultimately caused by forces beyond our control" (Rachels 483). Taylor recognizes this problem as well, for he concludes that if causal determinism stands true and "everything is caused and determined" then it is unavoidable to

admit that anyone "could not have decided, willed, chosen, or desired otherwise" then they did in any given situation (Taylor 143). In this way the hard determinist would remain strong in their theory that even actions based on one's desires are not free because those desires are causally determined, and therefore the decisions based on them are causally determined as well.

As for the student deliberating where to go to college, the hard determinist would insist that even though his or her parents are not forcing them to make a decision the student's desires have still been shaped and caused by many outside factors. One main factor that influences one's desires is his or her upbringing, which then adds the desires of one's parents into his or her own desires. The student choosing between UP and USC, for example, could have been taught by his or her parents during childhood to value frugality and saving money, and therefore the student is more likely to choose the cheaper school. The student may have also been taught to value serving others and is then more likely to choose the school that emphasis service. The student may have been raised in a smaller city and finds the LA ghetto just slightly daunting, and therefore would be more likely to choose the smaller and more personal school. Essentially, due to his or her upbringing being a critical cause to his or her personality the student will choose to attend the University of Portland. Even though the student may feel as though their decision was free, according to hard determinism it cannot be free because it is based on his or her desires which are caused by everything else that has happened in their life up until that moment. Therefore the decision of the student could not have been any other way based on the initial causes leading up to it, and free will, defined either as uncaused decisions or decisions caused by desires, does not exist for that student.

By first understanding the theory of causal determinism as being the idea that all actions are caused by the conditions that existed just before the action was taken, one can then begin to

understand hard determinism as it uses this theory as its foundation. One can then recognize that hard determinism contends that all physical actions, including human behavior and decisions since they are a result of physical chemical reactions in the brain, are caused by other physical influences and can therefore be determined. Thus, hard determinists do not believe in free will, which they define as uncaused action, because there are no actions that could possibly be uncaused. Furthermore, free will entails that the possibility for multiple outcomes of a decision are possible, which hard determinists reject as well, contending that since all action is caused by the exact conditions that existed before it there is no possibility for any other outcome. Some may object to the hard determinist position, however, by claiming that their definition of free will is incorrect. The compatibilists for example argue that the correct definition of free will is action that is caused by one's own desires, rather than forced by outside influences, and would therefore object to the hard determinists assertion that free will does not exist. The hard determinist would be able to counter this, though, by illuminating any objectors to the fact that one's desires and personality are formed, or caused, by outside influences. Therefore, these outside causes have an indirect effect on one's actions, which means that no human has complete freedom of will. In this way the hard determinist is assured that free will, regardless of how it is defined, cannot exist because there is no way to escape outside influences, and therefore all action of any kind is caused, is able to be determined, and is therefore not free.

Works Cited

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