

AN ECLECTIC APPROACH TO THE DOCTRINE OF DETERMINISM

Etaoghene Paul Polo

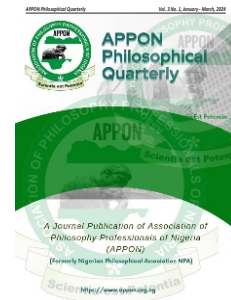
Department of Philosophy,
Margaret Lawrence University, Galilee, Delta State, Nigeria,
Doctoral Student, Department of Bioethics and Medical Humanities,
University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria
paul.polo@mlugalilee.edu.ng

Tel: +2347034260791

And

Donatus Osatofoh Ailodion

Austin Peay State University
Tennessee, United States of America
ailodiondon@gmail.com
Tel: +2348144286198



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

Are human beings actually free beings? The doctrine of determinism gives a negative response to this question. Determinism therefore claims that humans are not free to act or make choices, since they are always constrained in some way. By so doing, determinism denies human freedom and human moral responsibility. It rejects the idea that humans act freely, or that humans can be regarded as responsible for their actions and inactions. This outright denial of human freedom and human moral responsibility is certainly pregnant with several implications, which this article is aimed at exposing. This article adopts the expository, analytic and critical methods. It begins with a clarification of the concept of determinism and then goes on to discuss five types of determinism, namely: (a) physical, (b) psychological, (c) historical, (d) ethical and (e) theological determinism, respectively. Also, this article discusses two categories of determinism known as soft and hard determinism.

Furthermore, this article exposes some implications of determinism for events and humanity. Finally, adopting eclecticism as its theoretical framework, this article proposes that it is best to approach the doctrine of determinism by simply recognising and accepting the fact that there are aspects of humans that are determined, and there are equally aspects of humans that are not determined. By so doing, this article establishes that approaching the doctrine of determinism eclectically is the surest way of accommodating the opposing doctrines of determinism and 'freewillism.'

Keywords: Determinism, Freewill, Choice, Moral-Responsibility, Eclectic Approach

Introduction

Of the many fundamental issues considered in the reflective-rational enterprise known as philosophy, the issue or doctrine of 'determinism' is arguably a foremost, as it evokes the question as to whether humans have freedom of choice (freewill), so as to be able to act without being constrained by any external or internal factor beyond their control. The theory of determinism answers this question in the negative by partially or completely denying human freedom, and thereby also denying the idea of human moral responsibility, since only free beings can be accountable or responsible for their actions. This, as a matter of fact, has problematic implications for humanity, all existents and events.

To address the implications of determinism, this article adopts a theoretical framework known as eclecticism. By 'eclecticism,' we refer to "a conceptual approach that does not hold rigidly to a single paradigm or set of assumptions, but instead draws upon multiple theories, styles, or ideas to gain complementary insights into a subject, or applies different theories in particular cases."¹ In other words, an eclectic approach is one that involves recognising and accepting different dimensions to an issue, without holding rigidly to only one dimension.

Precisely, this article establishes that approaching the doctrine of determinism eclectically is the surest way of accommodating the opposing doctrines of determinism and freewillism. And this simply involves recognising and accepting the fact that there are aspects of humans that

are determined, and there are equally aspects of humans that are not determined.

What does Determinism Mean?

The philosophical term 'determinism' is itself a derivative of an English word (verb) 'determine,' which basically means to 'set limits' for someone, something, or an event, as the case may be, or to decide in advance, beforehand, the fate; that is, what will become of someone, something, or an event. Determine also means making something happen in a particular way or be of a particular type.²

Usually, when something is determined, it cannot go beyond the limits that have been set for it. To buttress this point, let us briefly consider the case of a car. A car, regardless of its form and kind, has an accelerator, which determines its speed or velocity. If the accelerator is adjusted by the driver to a high level, the motion of the car will be fast, but if it is adjusted to a low level, the speed of the car will be slow, and the process continues like that *ad infinitum*. Following from this example, it can be posited that whatever is determined is necessarily, inevitably, or unavoidably constrained to operate within a set or fixed limit.

Determinism is the "theory that everything in the universe is entirely determined by causal laws, so that whatever happens at any given moment is the effect of some antecedent cause."³ Thus, the central claim of determinism is that "the course of the future is entirely determined by the conjunction of the past and the laws of nature."⁴ That is, determinism is "the doctrine which claims that everything, including the will of human beings is

¹ "Eclecticism." In *New World Encyclopaedia*, Available at <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Eclecticism>. Accessed March 28, 2024.

² "Determine" in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Available at https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/determine. Accessed March 21, 2024.

³ Louis Paul Pojman, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, 4th ed., (USA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999): 320.

⁴ Kevin Timpe, "Free Will," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer Reviewed Academic Resource*, ISSN 2161-0002, Available at <https://iep.utm.edu/freewill/>. Accessed March 21, 2024.

caused.”⁵ Determinism emphasizes universal causation; insisting that human actions are governed by law.⁶ Determinism is the idea that “everything that happens is fully determined by what has gone before it: every event has antecedent causes which were sufficient to ensure its occurrence.”⁷ The view expressed here is simply that there is no event which is not caused; that is, every event or state of affairs must have a cause; and since human actions, as well as the agent who gives rise to those actions are events, or state of affairs, every human action, including the agent himself is caused.⁸

Based on the foregoing, a comprehensive but succinct definition of determinism will be that: determinism is a theory which holds that the limits and fates of individuals, things and events in the universe (cosmos) have been set, fixed, caused, or decided beforehand by some superior force, reality, or antecedent conditions, so that they can only live, exist, act, operate, grow, or occur in accordance with their preset limits or fates. This definition, when related to human beings, evokes the question as to whether humans are free beings. In other words, the question here is that: “Are humans free to act or make choices on their own without any constraint?” Or put differently, “given that things, events and individuals in the universe have preset fates and limits, can we say our actions as humans stem from freedom of choice?”

As long as the theory or idea of determinism is concerned, the answer to the above questions is simply NO. That is, determinism holds that human actions and behaviours do not stem from freedom of choice; that is, human actions and behaviours are fixed or preset by some

eternal natural laws, and by events in the past, some of which have even preceded our birth.⁹ In the final analysis therefore, determinism completely negates or denies human freedom (freewill). On this basis, we can conclude that determinism, as a concept, has the concepts of 'indeterminism,' 'freedom' and 'freewillism' as its direct opposite; whereas it is synonymous to, or closely associated with terms such as 'fatalism,' 'predestination' and 'causality.' And of course, the whole idea of determinism is not without implications for humanity. This we shall come to discover in the last section of this article.

Types of Determinism

Depending on the reasons given as to why the human person is not free, several types of determinism can be identified, some of which are: physical determinism, psychological determinism, historical determinism, ethical determinism and theological determinism. *Physical Determinism*: This is simply the view that human actions do not stem from freedom of choice, but are determined by the laws of physical nature (universe), which the human person is subject to. This view is based on a materialistic conception of the human person, whereby the human person is regarded as purely matter (material), having no immaterial or spiritual element. But is the materialistic conception of the human person not somewhat mistaken? Is it true that the human person is completely material? Is it possible to explain all human acts and experiences in material terms, or in terms of the physical laws of nature? Are there not experiences, such as ecstasy, telepathy, clairvoyance, and so on, which point to the fact that the human person is

⁵ Onyekwere George-Felix Nwaorgu, “Freedom and Determinism: A Crucial Theme in Metaphysics,” in Kolawole Owolabi, (ed.) *Issues and Problems in Philosophy* (Ibadan: GROVACS, 2000): 122.

⁶ Anselm Jimoh, *Philosophy: A Guide for Beginners* (Ibadan: Ebony Books & Kreations, 2014): 177.

⁷ Thomas Mautner, (ed.), *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 2000): 137.

⁸ Louis Paul Pojman, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, 321.

⁹ Anselm Jimoh, *Philosophy: A Guide for Beginners*, 178.

more than matter; that the human person also has immaterial elements?¹⁰ How do we account for the concepts of soul, spirit and ghost if we subscribe to the materialistic conception which totally reduces the human person to matter?

Psychological Determinism: Psychological determinism is the view that human beings are not free because their actions are conditioned or caused by psychological factors such as instincts, motives and environment.¹¹ This is evident in the thoughts of Sigmund Freud, Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, respectively.

Historical Determinism:

Historical determinism is the view that events in history are caused, shaped or influenced by some factors, or currently constrained by various forces beyond the control of the human person, so that they must as a matter of necessity occur. In other words, historical determinism holds that historical events such as wars and revolutions are fated, destined to happen, unavoidable, and cannot but happen. The fatalists (those who believe that events are destined or fated), for instance, believe that “what will happen will happen,” and that there is nothing anybody can do to prevent what will happen from happening.¹²

Advocates of historical determinism include Hegel, who argues that “historical events are inevitable as they are part of the dialectical process in absolute self-development,”¹³ and Karl Marx, who, adopting the Hegelian paradigm of dialectics, and replacing Hegel's “absolute self...” with “productive or economic forces,”¹⁴ states that historical events, such as wars and revolutions, are determined by economic forces.

Ethical Determinism:

In brief, ethical determinism is the view that human actions are determined by social principles of right (good) and wrong (bad/evil). The idea here is that individuals by nature are conditioned or compelled to do only that which they or society see as good, while refraining from doing what they or society see as bad. The human will, according to advocates of this theory, is made for the good and always attracted by what is good. That is, an individual is not free to abandon what is good and choose what is bad (evil). No one can deliberately choose what he knows to be evil precisely because it is evil. If one chooses to do evil, it is because he/she sees it as something good, or at least because he/she sees some aspects of it as good.¹⁵ Ethical determinism is clearly expressed in the views of Socrates and Plato.

Theological Determinism: The view here is that God is omniscient; that God has foreknowledge of what every individual will become, do and achieve in future, even before an individual is born. The question or contention which arises as a result of this view is basically that since God has foreknowledge of everything, so that He therefore knows in advance or beforehand what every single individual will do or become, can humans really be said to be free in the true sense? The answer for advocates of theological determinism is simply NO. In other words, central to theological determinism is the view that Humans are not responsible for their actions, whether good or bad, since all of them have been known to God even before their birth.

Recognising the negative implications of theological determinism in relation to God, several Christian scholars have overtime

¹⁰ Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1990): 189-190.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Anselm Jimoh, *Philosophy: A Guide for Beginners*: 180.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Joseph I. Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction*: 186.

argued that God's foreknowledge is not the cause of our actions as human beings, neither does it rule out our freedom. St. Augustine is a notable figure in this regard. St. Augustine admits that God has already known in advance whatever any individual is going to do in the future. However, he went on to state that God's foreknowledge does not push or compel an individual to act; an individual acts freely. That is, God's foreknowledge is not the cause of an individual's actions; neither does it hinder an individual's freedom.¹⁶

Classification of Determinism

Considering the extent or degree to which human freedom is denied, determinism can be broadly categorised into two, namely: 'soft' and 'hard' determinism, respectively. *Soft Determinism*: This does not completely deny moral responsibility, even though it argues that human beings are to some extent determined. In other words, soft determinism leaves room for human freedom. In furtherance, soft determinism is the position that “causal determinism is true, but we still act as free, morally responsible agents when, in the absence of external constraints, our actions are caused by our desires,”¹⁷ or borne out of our choices. Philosophers who argue in favour of determinism but do not completely dismiss human freedom are regarded as soft determinists. Philosophers in this group, such as David Hume, John Stuart Mill and Thomas Hobbes, are therefore not thoroughgoing determinists. Soft

determinism is usually contrasted with hard determinism, which we shall now discuss.

Hard Determinism: This is the view that the entire universe and all existents are determined, and that freedom of action is an illusion. Again, hard determinism is the “doctrine that human actions and choices are causally determined by forces and influences over which a person exercises no meaningful control.”¹⁸ In other words, hard determinism, unlike soft determinism, completely dismisses human freedom, thereby leaving no room for human moral responsibility.

Philosophers who totally deny human freedom and moral responsibility are thoroughgoing determinists, and therefore fall into the category of hard determinists. Particularly, the materialists who reduce the human person to a machine, or see no essential difference between humans and animals fall into this category. Baron Paul von Holbach and La Mettrie also belong to this group.¹⁹

Some Implications of Determinism for Events and Humanity

As earlier stated, the theory of determinism denies or negates human freedom, whether completely or partially. The implication of this is that it is illusory (false) for us to assume that, as humans, we are freely in control of our actions. From the perspective of ethics (morality), this implies that “we cannot be held responsible for any misdeeds; neither can we be appraised for any virtuous deeds.”²⁰ In this sense,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁷ Philip A. Pecorino, “Chapter 7: Freedom and Determinism, 7 Compatibilism,” in *Introduction to Philosophy: an Online Textbook*. Queensborough Community College. Available at https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%207%20Freedom/Freedom_Compatibilism.htm. Accessed March 21, 2024.

¹⁸ American Psychological Association (APA), “Hard Determinism,” in *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, available at <https://dictionary.apa.org/harddeterminism#:~:text=the%20doctrine%20that%20human%20actions,could%20not%20possibly%20be%20otherwise>. Accessed March 21, 2024.

¹⁹ Joseph Omoregbe, *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction*, 191.

²⁰ Anselm Jimoh, *Philosophy: A Guide for Beginners*, 178.

perpetuators of vicious acts such as cultism, witchcraft, wizardry, armed robbery, kidnapping, hire/character assassination, rape, electoral and examination malpractice, embezzlement of public funds, *et cetera*, will not be blameworthy. Likewise, anyone who does good or acts virtuously will not be praiseworthy.

Put succinctly, for advocates of determinism, whatever an individual does, whether good or bad (evil), he/she is not to be praised or blamed. In addition, from the view point of determinism, there will be no reward (heaven) of any sort for anyone who lives a holy (good) life. Neither will there be punishment (hell) for anyone who lives a bad life, since all that one has done, does and will do, or what one has been, is and will be, has been decided, fixed or preset beforehand, unknowing to him/her. If this is the case, it will be absurd for us to praise virtuous living, while condemning vicious living, since both kinds of life, for determinists, are equally bestowed on individuals by nature, so that in the long run, for determinists, every individual is simply living a life intended for him/her by nature.

Furthermore, by denying human freedom, determinism consequently denies human freewill, choice, authenticity, creativity, autonomy, subjectivity and ingenuity, all of which can only be found where and when there is freedom. By denying human freedom and consequently human freewill, choice, authenticity, creativity, autonomy, subjectivity and ingenuity, determinism negates the school of thought in philosophy known as 'existentialism;' for all that existentialism advocates (that is, freedom, freewill, choice, authenticity, creativity, autonomy, subjectivity and ingenuity, and so on) are negated by determinism. In other words,

determinism, put precisely, is anti-existentialism.

Particularly, determinism negates existentialism on the ground that it holds that individuals have been fixed, intended to live, act or behave in certain ways. This is simply to say that for determinism, every individual has a fixed essence; whereas, for existentialism, there are no fixed essences for individuals. In other words, while existentialism holds that it is the duty of every individual to create his/her own essence (purpose), determinism holds that the essences of individuals have been fixed beforehand, even before their birth. From this it can be deduced that while existentialism makes the human person an active architect of his/her life, determinism makes the human person an inactive spectator in the voyage of life.

Furthermore, by holding that every event has been fixed beforehand, or caused by some antecedent conditions, determinism completely rules out the possibility of occurrence of events by chance. Specifically, the concept of 'chance' refers to the random or spontaneous occurrence of events, usually in the absence of any obvious intention or cause. That is, something occurs by chance when it does not have any cause that you can see or understand.²¹ In other words, to say that an event occurred (occurs) by chance is tantamount to saying that event was (is) not caused by any antecedent event. Determinism totally rejects this idea; since it posits that every event is caused or conditioned by some preceding factors.

An Eclectic Approach to the Doctrine of Determinism

Since the whole thesis of determinism, especially hard determinism seems to

²¹ "Chance." In *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Available at https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/determine. Accessed March 21, 2024.

completely dismiss human freedom, the questions as to whether the human person is free to make choices, and whether humans are morally responsible for their actions and inactions will therefore be answered in the negative by a thorough-going exponent of determinism. But this will be a very lopsided view about the human person, especially when we ruminate on the opposing thesis of “freewill,” and the manifold negative consequences which are associable with an outright denial of human moral responsibility.

Consequently, a more tenable view to hold in this regard is that, there are aspects of humans that are determined, and there are equally aspects of humans that are not determined. For instance, on one hand, a person has no control over the time, day and year he/she was born – an unborn child cannot decide when he/she will be born – a person cannot choose his/her original skin colour or ethnic group, and so on. These are naturally bestowed, or given. On the other hand, a person can choose the institution he/she will attend, place of residence, occupation, and sports to participate in or not. These, to a large extent, are subject to the choices of individual persons.

From the aforesaid, it follows that humans are not entirely determined; for while some aspects of humans are determined, some others are not, but are subject to individual human freewill or choices. Determinism therefore holds true in relation to humans. But there is a limit to determinism where freewill starts. And owing to the freewill humans have, we cannot completely dismiss human moral responsibility. Humans are therefore both praiseworthy and blameworthy. Humans can therefore be regarded as responsible for their actions and inactions.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the whole idea of determinism can be succinctly construed as evoking the question as to whether humans

are free beings. That is, determinism stirs up the question: “Are humans free to act or make choices on their own without any constraint?” Or put differently, “given that things, events and individuals in the universe have preset fates and limits, can we say our actions as humans stem from freedom of choice?” Determinism answers these questions in the negative by saying 'no.' In other words, in all its forms and kinds, determinism denies human freedom both partially and completely, as in the case of soft and hard determinism, respectively. However, when the whole idea of determinism, especially hard determinism, is considered to a logical conclusion, it will be discovered that determinism, by denying human freedom, equally denies human moral responsibility, so that it tends to justify vices perpetuated in society by some individuals, while not even appraising virtuous living on the part of some individuals, thereby implying that whether one does good or bad, he/she is merely living the kind of life nature intends for him/her. The outright denial of human moral responsibility hinged on the doctrine of determinism has many negative consequences, some of which have been identified in this article. Faced with this reality, this article proposes that a more tenable approach to determinism is the view that there are aspects of humans that are determined, and there are equally aspects of humans that are not determined. This submission will certainly go a long way to accommodate the opposing doctrines of determinism and freewillism.

Bibliography

APA Dictionary of Psychology. Available at <https://dictionary.apa.org/hard-determinism#:~:text=the%20doctrine%20that%20human%20actions,could%20not%20possibly%20be%20otherwise>. Accessed March 21, 2024.

Jimoh, Anselm. *Philosophy: A Guide for Beginners*. Ibadan: Ebony Books and

Kreations, 2014.
New World Encyclopedia. Available at <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Electicism>. Accessed March 28, 2024.

Nwaorgu, Onyekwere George-Felix. "Freedom and Determinism: A Crucial Theme in Metaphysics," in Owolabi, Kolawole, ed. *Issues and Problems in Philosophy*. Ibadan: GROVACS, 2000.

Omoregbe, Joseph. *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1990.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Available at https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/determine. Accessed March 21, 2024.

Pecorino, A. Philip, "Chapter 7: Freedom and Determinism, 7 Compatibilism," in *Introduction to*

Philosophy: An Online Textbook. Queens borough Community College. Available at: https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%207%20Freedom/Freedom_Compatibilism.htm. Accessed March 21, 2024.

Pojman, Paul Louis. *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, 4th ed. USA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999.

Thomas Mautner, (ed.), "Determinism/Indeterminism." In *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.

Timpe, Kevin. "Free Will," in *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: A Peer Reviewed Academic Resource*, Available at <https://iep.utm.edu/freewill/>. Accessed March 21, 2024.