

AN EXAMINATION OF SAM HARRIS' POSITION ON ALVIN PLANTINGA'S FREEWILL DEFENSE

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ABSTRACT

The problem of this study is the fact that there is a serious disagreement between philosophers like Sam Harris and Alvin Plantinga on the issue of freewill. This paper aims to resolve this discrepancy by supporting the position of Plantinga that it is logically impossible for God to create free persons and determine their actions. This perspective aligns with the views of Augustine of Hippo, who attributes evil to the misuse of human freewill rather than direct divine intention. For Harris, freewill is an illusion. Human wills are simply not their own making. Harris further argues that thought and intentions emerge from background causes of which human beings are unaware and over which they exert no conscious control. This position promotes determinism over and against the concept of freewill, thereby portraying humans as beings controlled by external forces. This paper employs phenomenological research methodology and recommends, among others, that though thoughts and intentions may be influenced, human beings are still responsible for their actions as they are endowed with the ability to choose. It supports the concept of freewill based on moral responsibility, which upholds that a person is blameworthy and ought to be accountable for violating standards of conduct.

KEYWORDS: Neurophysiology, Freewill, Illusion, Determinism, and Moral responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Freedom is the liberty given to humans for the exercise of one's rights, powers, desires, and wishes, according to one's desires, without external restraints, while freewill is the human power to act without the constraint of necessity, fate, prior causes, or divine intervention, as one acts out of his/her discretion. This view is disputed by Harris, an atheist with a religious side, an author, philosopher, and neuroscientist, as he believes that freewill does not exist. Looking at Harris's life, he was raised by a Jewish mother who was not religious and had a Quaker father. Though his parents got divorced when he was barely two years old, he grew to become one of the world's foremost atheists although he prefers not to be addressed

as such. He believes in morality, humanity, community, awe, rationality, transcendence, love, and selflessness. He is more interested in spiritual and philosophical questions. Harris holds that religion is a betrayal of science. Politically, Harris seems to prefer Democrats because they campaign less on religious issues. A neuroscientist and a philosopher notwithstanding, Harris is relatively liberal in his societal views. From the perspective of neuroscience (neurological experiment), Harris argues that the concept of freewill is incoherent. He holds that the content of experience is not a free choice, but a product of a complex interaction with the individual and the environment. Hence, human beings are not free. He further opines that for human beings to have a free choice; they need to be given access to everything that influences the choice.

Human beings are generally believed to be blessed with the ability to decide their actions. As a result, they can make decisions at different times, under various circumstances, and are held accountable for such actions, which form the basis for their moral responsibility. However, Harris' argument against freewill has denied human beings such freedom, as it posits that every action of a person is determined. Scholars like Gregg D. Caruso have supported this view to rule away the reality of freewill. Where is the moral responsibility of man if humans do not have freewill? How can the moral responsibility of human beings be validated? Is it possible that human beings are not responsible for their actions and inactions? Is freewill truly an illusion? If the possibility of freewill is not established, what then is the difference between human beings and artificial intelligence like robots? Lastly, how does the concept of freewill affect religious studies and belief in God? These and similar other questions are fundamental questions that inform the basis for this research. The thrust of this paper is to evaluate Harris' argument. The paper will examine his argument against the possibility of freewill in order to determine the validity of freewill. It is rather an illusion to think or believe that freewill does not exist.

THE CONCEPT OF FREEWILL

Freewill is the link between the soul (or psyche) and human action (Journal of Cognitive Science 2016:17-2). Freewill, in philosophy and science, is the supposed power or capacity of humans to make decisions or perform actions independently of any prior event or state of the universe. According to Peter van Inwagen, the term freewill is not commonly used outside the boundaries of philosophy. He posits that freewill is “a philosophical term of art” and is not usually used in non-philosophical language (Peter, 2008:329). Kane (1996:4), however, opines that freewill is “the power of agents to be the ultimate creators (or originators)

and sustainers of their ends or purposes. Here, Kane's main concentration is on the power of the individual to act freely. A German philosopher Michael Pauen understands freewill as self-determination without external influence (Michael, 2004:52). He suggests that the ability to perform an act and the ability to refrain from performing the act without external control is freewill. Thus, freewill is the ability to decide between two or more actions without any form of external coercion. Meister and co suggest that significant human freedom means that human beings can obey as well as disobey God depending on their preferred choice. They argue that a choice is a true choice if and only if it is a choice that can be made and corollary consequences follow, such as in the Garden of Eden (Meister and James, 2013:45).

FREEWILL DEFENCE

This is probably the most popular attempt to reconcile the existence of evil with the goodness of God. The defence states that evils are entirely due to the free choices made by human beings (and perhaps other fallen beings, including in some versions fallen angels). The Biblical record in Genesis states clearly that Adam and Eve were created good, but at a point in time, they decided to do evil. This decision to do evil implies that Adam and Eve had a will that was free to choose good or evil. At first, they chose the good path of service to God later, they willed to rebel against God. The same thing happened to Satan and his angels when they chose to serve God at one point and decided to rebel against God at another point in time (Timothy, 2015:55). Freewill defence is a doctrine that holds that God is an omniscient, all-powerful, and a perfectly good Being, in all cases, and created the best possible world despite it containing evil. Feinberg (2001:1184-1187) opines that "The free will defence begins by pointing out that God is not the cause of evil in the world; the abuse of human freewill is." God certainly could have created beings with perfect morality, but a perfect being would not have freewill in every moral scenario and, therefore, would be lacking in actual morality rather than determined morality.

God was indeed good to have created free beings who can commit acts of evil utilizing their freewill. Nonetheless, their actions should not negate God's goodness in creating them free. The abuse of freewill by man is a great evil, but it is a greater evil to have no freewill (Jeffrey, 2020:6). This position is not far from the view of St. Augustine who believes that evil does not exist independently, but that the lack of proper use of good by man creates various evils in the world (Abdullah & Masoumeh, 2022:67). This view is more popular. More so because evil is a product of the actions of man. This position tactically exonerates God from being the ultimate cause of evil, and at the same time does not deny the existence of God. It

rather pointed out that God created man with a propensity to sin or liberty to choose (Nachi, 2021:4). Freewill in this context implies freedom, which is the power or right to act, speak, and change as one wants without hindrance or restraint. Freedom is often associated with liberty and autonomy in the sense of "giving oneself one's laws". Something is said to be "free" if it can change and is not constrained in its present state. In a nutshell, freedom is the absence of restriction, coercion, or constraint in choice and action. James Sennett argues that what is relevant to the freewill defence is the idea of being free concerning an action. Sennett further states that if a person is free for a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will act, or that he will not (James, 1998:45).

The freewill defence holds that God is an omniscient, all-powerful, and perfectly good Being, in all cases, and thus created the best possible world despite it containing evil. Feinberg (2001:1184-1187) opines that "The free will defence begins by pointing out that God is not the cause of evil in the world; the abuse of human freewill is." God certainly could have created beings with perfect morality, but a perfect being would not have freewill in every moral scenario and therefore would be lacking in actual morality rather than determined morality. Plantinga (1974:343) further argues that the heart of the freewill defence is the claim that it is possible that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if so, God may have a good reason for creating a world containing evil.

The position of Plantinga is that God created a world that contains moral good and moral evil. The keyword here is moral, which implies a sense of right or wrong conduct. Could this be the true position of the Genesis account of creation? God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good, and He validated it completely. And there was evening and there was night, a sixth day (Gen. 1:31). The Bible further confirms that God gave humanity the power, choice, or freewill between good and evil (Ex. 30:15). God's willingness to allow humankind the freedom of making choices allows for the possibility of moral evil.

EXAMINATION OF HARRIS' POSITION ON FREEWILL

Harris used causal control to establish his point that freewill is an illusion. In control theory, a causal system (also known as a physical or non-anticipative system) is a system where the output depends on past and current inputs but not future inputs. That is to say that the output depends only on the input for values. The idea is that

the output of a function at any time depends only on past and present values of the input. Causal reasoning is the process of identifying causality: the relationship between a cause and its effect. This applies to Physics and Mathematics. However, to relate it to the subject matter, he introduced neurophysiological events, neuroimaging devices, and functional magnetic resonance:

Illusion: An Overview: Illusion is a case of discrepancy between reality and perception of reality. It happens when we do not perceive objects as they truly are. According to West, an illusion is a misrepresentation of a real sensory stimulus. He argued that it is an interpretation that contradicts objective reality. For example, a child who perceives tree branches at night as if they are goblins may be said to be having an illusion (West, n.d:8). He added that illusions are special perceptual experiences in which information arising from “real” external stimuli leads to an incorrect perception, or false impression, of the object or event from which the stimulation comes. This implies a false ascribing of reality based on what one sees or imagines. It is a distortion of human perception, mostly described as *misinterpretations of a sensory stimulus*. Illusions are thought to occur when stimuli from a perceived object are combined with mental images to produce a false perception. According to Reynolds (1988:217-223), illusion is best defined as a discrepancy between one's perceptions of an object or event observed under different conditions. He added that Conditions may differ in terms of stimulus exposure, stimulus context, or experiential context. In a nutshell, an illusion is a perversion of the senses, a false belief or idea. This is because the brain is deceived into seeing things very differently from what they are as it tries to interpret the information it is receiving. There are three main kinds of illusion: optical illusions, auditory illusions, and tactile illusions (Stem, 2005:10).

- i. **Optical illusion:** An optical or visual illusion is a kind of illusion in which the images perceived through the sense of sight tend to be misleading or deceptive, causing errors in perception.
- ii. **Auditory illusion:** Auditory illusions mislead the ears through sounds. These sounds are usually those that are not present in the physical stimulus but are heard by the ears and perceived as a sound related to the stimulus in the environment.
- iii. **Tactile illusion:** While optical and auditory illusions are common manifestations of several psychological disorders, such as schizophrenia and psychosis, tactile illusion is experienced by patients who have undergone

amputation. The phantom limb is a tactile illusion wherein the patient still 'feels' pain in the leg, arm, or digit that has already been removed.

The above informs the view of Harris on freewill, which denies man the right of responsibility. Consequently, it might not be appropriate to apportion praise or blame to anyone as no one is responsible for any action. Could this assertion be true? Can a man be said to be irresponsible? What then happens to human moral responsibility? These and more are some research questions that form the basis for this research.

THE COMPONENTS OF HUMAN BEINGS

Sequel to Harris' projection that gave more attention to the brain as the major determinant or influencer of human actions, it is pertinent to dive a little into the components of a human being to know the place of the brain in the actions of man. Human beings are created with spirit (the spiritual dimension), soul (the psychological dimension), and body (the physical dimension). Hence, Apostle Paul prayed that the entire system (spirit, soul, and body) be kept holy (1 Thess. 5:3). The aforementioned (spirit, mind, and body) are the three entities that make up a total human being. They are integrated into a whole and make up the total human being. The brain is not considered here as part of the body because it is not, but a creation of the mind. It is that part of the mind that is physical.

What then is the mind? The mind has been variously defined as that which is responsible for one's thoughts and feelings, the seat of the faculty of reason, or the aspect of intellect and consciousness experienced as combinations of thought, perception, memory, emotion, will, and imagination, including all unconscious cognitive processes. The term is often used to refer, by implication, to the thought processes of reason (Sunil, 2011:6). As a result, the mind is the state of faculties that are responsible for our mental phenomena. The brain is embedded in the mind and located in the head as an important organ of the body. The mind refers to our ability to think, feel, and engage in physical activity. The brain, on the other hand, refers to the physical organ in our head that supports these functions.

Given the above, the mind controls/ uses the brain, and the brain responds to the mind. The mind also functions in the brain. By implication, people choose their actions; their brains do not force them to do anything. Though there would be no conscious experience without the brain, the experience cannot be reduced to the brain's actions (Leaf, 2021:4). The mind is the centre of reasoning that transfers thoughts to the brain, which disseminates the information to the various parts of the body for implementation. What this means is that the mind is still part of the body to which the brain belongs. There is no external force here that influences the brain.

Man's choice of action is his. The brain only receives from the mind what relates to the other parts of the body. It is the mind that makes the man. Human thoughts and actions are completely his. By implication, man is morally responsible for his actions.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF MAN

Moral responsibility concerns the extent to which a person believes that another individual or group is blameworthy and ought to be accountable for violating standards of conduct by either behaving unacceptably or failing to behave acceptably (Wisneski, 2016:9). In moral responsibility, the act is viewed as the agent's own. Aristotle seems to have been the first to construct a theory of moral responsibility. He begins with a brief statement of the concept of moral responsibility, that it is sometimes appropriate to respond to an agent with praise or blame based on her actions and/or dispositional traits of character. A bit later, he clarifies that only a certain kind of agent qualifies as a moral agent and is thus properly subject to ascriptions of responsibility, namely, one who possesses a capacity for decision (Eshleman, 2014:2). According to Aristotle, one is an apt candidate for praise or blame if and only if the action or disposition is voluntary. His view is supported too, by Nurten Gokalp, who opined that freedom is usually regarded as a presupposition of moral responsibility: the actions for which one may be praised or blamed, rewarded or punished, are just those which one performs freely (Gokalp, 2012:1). This is a position that Harris would not accept as he denies the existence of freewill and holds that there is a causal control for each of our actions.

Nonetheless, Compatibilists argue that although our actions are indeed ultimately caused by events outside of us, we can still make sense of moral responsibility (Elinor, 2005:344). Does this position not look contradictory? How can the moral responsibility of a man be established when there is a cognitive factor that tends to influence his actions? When an action is influenced, the actor loses the sense of responsibility. Even though mitigating factors such as various mental disorders and external factors can limit our ability to act freely, to claim that freewill is an illusion is unacceptable. If human beings do not have freewill, how can we be morally responsible for our actions? Why are people praised and blamed for what they do right and wrong? The only basis to hold on to this school of thought is the fact that determinism or predestination in theology does not cancel the existence of freewill, even though both seem to be incompatible.

Theologians uphold that God created human beings with the capacity to make morally significant choices. That is why Jesus and Apostle Paul would always

appeal to humans to turn to God and act righteously. This kind of appeal, as recorded in the Scriptures, would have been irrational if man could not make choices. The scripture testifies to man's responsibility and freedom when it says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). According to the Scripture above, "whoever (this is without exemption) believes" in Him will not perish. "Believe" here is a product of freewill (choice). A choice is something that is up to man. Choosing is a specific kind of willingness. God allows humans to choose. Thus, human beings are responsible for the consequences of their actions.

The rebuke of Jesus to the Pharisees, in admittedly different circumstances, is surely appropriate here: "You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone" (Luke 11:42). This shows that even Jesus knew that the Pharisees had freedom of choice. Though humans' freedom is within the cosmic system that God superintends and does not contradict God's sovereignty (Col. 1:16-17), yet God allows them the freedom to make decisions and execute actions, whether good or evil (Pr. 16:4). Therefore, man is directly responsible for his actions and inactions.

Man is a thinking being who should not be separated from his thoughts. His thoughts belong to him, and it is his thoughts that influence his actions. Thus, the mind shapes the man. He is not like a moving vehicle controlled by an external factor (the driver). God manifests Himself in the human mind with His scientific and creative inclinations. This is the image of God in man that dignifies him. The human mind (the soul) is the seat of man's will and creative nature. Man's ability to think and exercise free will distinguishes him from robots and other man-made materials. This is the essence of man. If it were removed, then man would be less than human and not deserving of dignity. It is on this note that the natural sciences, which claim that man is subject, like everything else, to physical necessity, rather seem to be an illusion. Though man is part of nature, the fact remains that a certain priority and power (free will) differentiate him from other phenomena in the universe.

From the perspective of African Traditional Religious belief, moral evil means violations of acceptable moral standards of the society. The violations may be in words, actions, or reactions. These wrongful acts are sinful and worthy of divine punishment, while good acts are righteous and worthy of divine reward. God of heavens and earth, according to African Traditional belief, created man as a moral being. One of the fundamental beliefs of ATR is that man is the head of all creation and was created as a moral agent, gifted with the ability to distinguish between right and wrong (Awolalu, 1976: 275–287). Man responds to God's instruction because he is created as a moral being with a conscience and can differentiate between good and evil. Africans hold that God created society as a moral institution. As such, man as a

moral being is solely responsible for his actions. In African communities, there is a punishment stated as the authorised standard of social and spiritual habits for the people in the society. A breach of, or failure to adhere to, is a display of moral evil that incurs the displeasure of Deity and His functionaries on the offender. This is because Africans believe that man is solely responsible for his actions.

According to Card (2010:109), it is universally accepted that to perform an evil action, an agent must be morally responsible for what she does. Card argues that hurricanes and rattlesnakes can cause great harm, but they cannot perform evil actions because they are not moral agents. Furthermore, he stresses that moral agents only perform evil actions when they are morally responsible for what they do, and their actions are morally inexcusable. It follows that evildoers must act voluntarily, intend or foresee their victim's suffering, and lack moral justification for their actions. This implies that evil is the consequence of the action(s) of a moral free agent. As thinking and acting beings, man pursues ends, and has the consciousness that they are his ends, subject to his own choice and control. Hence, it is illegitimate to say that freewill is an illusion. Many things are involved (at stake) if freewill is to be accepted as an illusion: The moral sanctions so universally and deeply rooted in the consciousness of mankind, the feelings of responsibility, the feelings of guilt and regret, the soul's fidelities and heroisms, its hopes and fears, its aims and ideals, and religion that have made man what he is, all that has contributed to the uplifting of the world are, to say the least, unaccounted for, if it must be held that man is born in chains. It is not freedom of will only that is at stake here; should Harris' position prevail, it is the very existence of a spiritual world and the aftermath of sin. Worthy of note is that a moral personality is a self-conscious, self-determining being.

EVALUATION

What freewill defence has done is to help project the fact that evil did not originate from God, though God allows it. Evil is ascribed to the activity of beings that are free and rational. God allows man the freedom of choice because it would have been evil to create man as a robot. Harris' position that freewill is an illusion is unacceptable. The concept of moral responsibility shows that man is responsible for his actions. This is because the ideal of determinism in philosophy or predestination in theology does not cancel the existence of freewill, though both seem to be incompatible. Human beings are created with three entities: spirit (the spiritual dimension), soul (the psychological dimension), and body (the physical dimension). African philosophy of the mind holds that the mind is deeply interconnected with the body and the spirit. Going by the African philosophical view, the mind is a dynamic

force that is part of the holistic being, which influences and can also be influenced by human actions. This projection implies that the mind is not just located in the head but is in every part of the person. This concept is different from the Western philosophy that pictures the mind as a separate entity. Philosophy of mind explores the nature of the mind, its relationship to the body, and questions about consciousness and thought processes. Substance dualist like Rene Descartes argues that the mind is an independently existing substance. Descartes argues that the mind is the source of consciousness, understanding, and feelings and that it is possible for the mind to exist without the body. In African metaphysics, the view of 'human's action being his implies that an individual is the primary agent of his actions, possessing the freedom to make choices. However, it acknowledges the influence of external factors like ancestral spirits and the surrounding forces. Even in social science, praxeology, which is the science of action, upholds that humans act purposefully. It argues that people have goals and devise means to achieve them.

CONCLUSION

Although human actions may be influenced, the point remains that whatever influences a man must first be accepted and settled in the mind. Man's choice of action is his. The brain only receives from the mind what it relates to the other parts of the body. Though mitigating factors like mental disorders and external factors can limit our ability to act freely, that does not in any way make the concept of freewill an illusion. Exceptions to people who are so affected. The issue is if there is no freewill, how can man be morally responsible for his actions and inactions? Why are people blamed and praised for what they do right or wrong? The point is that God created human beings with the capacity to make morally significant choices. There is no external influence, as the brain, which controls the actions of man, is still a physical part of the mind (body). A moral personality is a self-conscious, self-determining being. Thus, freewill is not an illusion, but the very essence of man. Consequently, should the thought of Harris prevail, this truth about freewill will be denied, and the dignity and moral responsibility of man will be at stake. Thus, an understanding of human moral responsibility will help to comprehend the facts about freewill. If there is no freewill, a virtue-based account of moral life and judgment according to the Scriptures would have been inappropriate. Therefore, to have any virtue at all, human beings must be able to make free choices and decisions. A moral personality is a self-conscious, self-determining being. Although this does not rule away the grace of God in the life of a person. God's grace enhances nature and assists freewill. Consequently, freewill is not an illusion, but the very essence of

man. On this note, it is not freedom of will that is at stake if we align with the thought of Harris, but also the consequences of sin and others.

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