Determinism and human action[1]

This handout follows the handout on 'Determinism'. You should read that handout first.

Physical determinism – determinism expressed in terms of physical causes and laws – provides the clearest most persuasive example of determinism. But determinism is a completely general doctrine, which could be just as true of human beings, our choices and actions, as it is of physical objects.

ACTION AND CAUSATION

If all causation is deterministic, then wherever we find causation, we find determinism. Are our actions caused? Intuitively, we say 'yes'; we explain our actions in terms of motivation, and it is natural to think of motivation as a kind of causation. Motivation – being moved – can feel like a psychological 'force', which is a causal idea; motivation makes things happen.

Notice that we use statements like 'If he had wanted to learn, he wouldn't have thrown away his books', and 'If he were to want a drink, he would go to the kitchen' – expressing the kind of regularity involved in causation. The same motives produce the same actions, at least in similar situations. (If the action is different, then we appeal to different causes or situation.)

We rely on this regularity all the time. We expect that others will, in their *voluntary* actions, act in very specific ways, e.g. in taking goods to market, I expect others to come, to want to buy, and so on. People's choices and actions are regular.

Determinism threatens free will like this: Our actions are events. Therefore, they have causes. Given the causes they have, no action is possible other than what we actually do. If we couldn't do any other action, then we do not have free will, e.g. to choose between doing different actions. The argument can be run at the level of choices as well: our choices are events, and so have causes. Given those causes, only one choice is possible. So we are not free to choose anything other than what we actually choose.

However, whether this argument is valid depends in part on whether the interpretations of determinism and of free will that it assumes are correct.

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[1] This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2008) *Philosophy for AS* (London: Routledge), Ch. 10, pp. 353-6, 371-4

An important contrast

There is, however, a very important difference between action and physical (or 'natural') causation, between what we *do* and things that just *happen*. Take the example of crop circles. Some people explain them in terms of natural forces, such as whirlwinds or a peculiar magnetic phenomenon. Once we have established the cause and how it works, we have explained crop circles – end of story. It is quite different to explain them in terms of people deliberately creating them. After showing *that* someone created a crop circle, we can ask *why* they did, how successful they are in creating a particular design, and so on. Unlike natural events, actions don't just happen.

We can develop this idea by noting another distinction – between what we do and what happens to us. Compare deliberately pushing someone over and accidentally knocking them over, e.g. because you trip. In both cases, your body moves in a particular way and has the same effect. But in one case, you do something, and you move your body, and in the other, something happens to you, and the movement of your body is imposed. When you do something, what you do is *intentional* – you intended it and brought it about. When something happens to you, what follows is not intentional – it just happened.

These two distinctions are the basis for a third contrast between action and natural causation. We are *responsible* for our actions, but natural causes are not responsible for their effects. For example, people who create crop circles can be blamed for destroying crops or praised for their creativity. If a crop circle is created by a whirlwind, the wind can't be praised or blamed.

But we can respond that we can make too much of these distinctions. After all, aren't our actions *natural* events?

HUMAN ACTION AS SUBJECT TO NATURAL LAWS

Physical laws

Physical determinism claims that determinism applies to all physical events. Our bodies are physical, so every event involving our bodies will be determined. This applies to our actions. Many actions involve moving one's body. Bodily movements are caused by events in the brain. For example, if I help an old lady across the road, immediately before I do this, my brain is in a particular state – the chemicals and neural connections are all a particular way. The neurones fire, my muscles move. That brain state causes my bodily movements, which are part of my action of helping the old lady. According to determinism, given the 'determinate set of conditions' of my brain and the laws of nature, those bodily movements were the only possible outcome. If there was no other possible movement of my body at that time, there was no other action I could have done.

This applies to the state of my brain that caused those bodily movements. It, too, physical, so it, too, is caused by some preceding physical state in accordance with the laws of nature. The state of my brain that caused my bodily movement of helping the old lady is causally determined by the state of my brain (and other aspects of the physical world) immediately before the decision. And that earlier state of my brain is determined by still earlier states of my brain and the world,

and so on. So helping the old lady across the road was causally determined long before I actually performed the action.

This depends, of course, on human actions falling under natural laws, either the laws of physics, as bodies are physical objects, or neurophysiological laws. If so, then, says physical determinism, our actions and choices are determined *in the same way* that physical events are. Human beings are part of the natural, physical world, and so events involving human beings should be able to be explained in the same way as other events. If this wasn't true, the laws of physics wouldn't apply to human bodies and their movements! But science claims that the laws of nature apply throughout the universe.

Psychological laws

We can run the same argument using psychology rather than physics and neurophysiology. Psychological determinism claims a person's psychology, their mental states and their experience, causally determines what they will choose to do. (Their mental states and experiences are in turn causally determined by previous mental states and by the physical world.) Our choices, then, have psychological causes. Given a determinate set of psychological conditions, and fixed psychological laws, only one choice is possible.

However, psychological determinism can make sense of the apparent difference between action and 'natural' causation. Explanations in terms of psychological causes – what someone believes and desires – are different from explanations in terms of physical causes. In physical explanation, we don't talk about desiring and believing (the whirlwind doesn't *want* anything), so we don't talk about *intending* either.

ALL HUMAN ACTION AS THE INEVITABLE RESULT OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEREDITARY FACTORS

There are two types of causal factors that contribute to our psychology – nature (genetics) and nurture (environment). So one version of psychological determinism claims that given our genetics and our upbringing, we cannot do or choose anything other than what we do and choose.

(We are taking genetics and environmental factors *together* as the relevant causes that would determine human action. Therefore we don't need to consider the famous debate that asks whether it is nature *or* nurture which influences human psychology and action more.)

In principle, there is no difference between the kind of arguments we can give for this view and the ones given for physical determinism. However, determinism on the basis of genetic and environmental factors is harder to establish.

Strong determinism

The strongest version is that every action we do is determined by our genetics + preceding environmental states and laws of psychology. If this was true, then we would be able to predict, in principle, exactly what someone was going to do, if

only we knew all about their psychology and their genetic inheritance. But there is little evidence to support this.

First, psychology has discovered very few strict laws. Instead, it has 'rules of thumb' that help us understand people and statistical laws. On rules of thumb: We can say that if someone is thirsty, they will try to find a drink. But this is not always true. They may be fasting, they may be paranoid and think someone is trying to poison them, and so on. We cannot list all the possible exceptions. So even with something as basic as thirst, there is not just one possible outcome. The outcome depends on the rest of the person's psychology. On statistical laws: psychologists can use experiments to find out what percentage of people will act in a certain way in a certain situation. But this doesn't support determinism, since each individual person may or may not act that way, and we can argue that this is because they can choose how to act.

Second, genes do not, on their own, determine a unique effect. They only ever have an effect through interaction with the environment. Someone may have a gene 'for' being tall, but how tall they become depends on their diet. Having a gene 'for' some trait only *increases your chances* of having that trait; it doesn't mean you will necessarily have it. This flexibility is very strong in the case of psychology. There may be some genetic dispositions to some traits of character, but we are also genetically disposed to be very responsive to our environment.

Finally, we have no laws that say someone from a particular background or who had a particular experience in the past will act in a particular way under certain situations. For example, 'people who had wealthy parents when growing up are interested in the arts'. Is this always true? No, even if a *high percentage* of people interested in the arts had wealthy parents than had poor parents. In many cases, a person with wealthy parents is not interested in the arts and a person with poor parents is.

<u>Weak determinism</u>
A weaker form of determinism claims that the *patterns* of our actions are determined by our genetics and experiences. For example, though you love fattening foods, on any particular occasion, you might be able to choose to eat fruit rather than cake. But you may always struggle with choices about food because you feel low self-esteem. And you cannot simply 'choose' not to feel low self-esteem. So you cannot choose not to struggle with choices about food.

In this way, important aspects of our character are determined, and our character determines many of the actions that we choose to do. On the basis of knowing someone's character, we may well be able to predict what they are going to do.

But is our character *determined*, rather than just influenced, by past experience? People can reinforce or undermine the character traits they have by the choices they make.

And even if actions express someone's character, they are not, for that reason, unfree. People often seem to be most free, certainly most 'themselves', when they are acting in character. We do not have to act out of character to be free.

Limitation is not determinism

Given what we know about genetics and environment, it seems very likely that what someone chooses to do is *limited* by both. You cannot choose to become a neurosurgeon if you do not have the right skills or intelligence. You cannot choose to become a knight in shining armour, because society does not recognise this way of life any more. But we still make choices, even if we don't have many options to choose between. The debate between free will and determinism is about the *possibility* of choice, not about the *extent* of choice.

We can respond that this overlooks the issue of blame and moral responsibility. We use genetic and environmental explanations in two ways that conflicts with thinking of people as free. First, we may appeal to someone's upbringing to argue that they shouldn't be blamed for what they did. Given their unhappy childhood, they were not responsible. Second, we sometimes explain social phenomena, e.g. crime, in terms of social systems. The person, we say, is a product of the system, or a symptom of how society is getting something wrong. We need to change the system, e.g. tackling inner city deprivation and creating employment opportunities, not blame the individual.

All this shows, we can respond, is the important and deep *influence* someone's environment may have on their choices. But it does not show that their choice was causally determined. Certain environmental conditions make choice difficult, others empower people. So we should change the environment to make it easier for people to make different choices. But this isn't determinism. Determinism would claim that *whatever* the environment, a person's choices are determined. Changing someone's environment wouldn't make them free, it would make them choose differently.

DETERMINISM DISTINGUISHED FROM PREDICTABILITY

Determinism is not the claim that we can predict every event accurately; it claims that every event is predictable *in principle*. The reason we cannot and do not predict events accurately is because we do not know everything about the laws of nature nor about the 'determinate set of conditions' that leads to the effect. A being that did have this knowledge would be able to make completely accurate predictions.

This goes for choices as well. Determinism doesn't claim that anyone can come to know *all* a person's mental state and experiences so as to be able to predict what they do. But it maintains that *if* we had this knowledge, we could predict what they do.

We should also note that predictability doesn't entail determinism. For example, you may simply know that if you offer someone prawns or meat, they will choose meat because they don't like prawns. Similarly, you can predict that a friend of yours will help this old lady across the street, because he is a kind person, in a good mood, and has just said that this is what he will do. These examples don't show that choices are determined, even if they can be predictable.