

Free Will – Hard Determinism

1. Things Outside of Our Control: Holbach begins by noting a number of things that man is not in control of. Man does not:

- Choose his birth (i.e., the time, place, etc.).
- Choose his constitution (i.e., genetic make-up).
- Choose his education and upbringing.

(1) Consider the first (our birth). What time period you are brought into, what nation you are born into, what type of government, what sort of religion, what sorts of cultural ideas, what inventions and technology you have access to—all of these factors have an ENORMOUS influence on what sort of person you turn out to be.

(2) Consider the second (our constitution). Just by being human, it seems that even many of our desires and inclinations are innate (just BUILT INTO US), and therefore outside of our control. For instance, we cannot CHOOSE to become thirsty. It simply happens to us. Here are some desires that seem to be built into our constitution:

- Thirst (desire for water)
- Hunger (desire for food)
- Tiredness (desire for rest)
- Sex drive (desire to procreate)
- The drive to seek pleasure or happiness
- The drive to avoid pain and suffering
- Self-preservation (avoiding danger or death)
- Preservation of loved ones (e.g., the desire to protect our young, which is especially strong in mothers with newborn children)

But, there is more. You did not choose your sex, nor your race. These things were just SET at the time of your birth, entirely out of your control. And consider ability: Some people have a natural capacity to be better at athletic activities than others. Some people are naturally better at math than others. Some are pre-disposed to obesity. Some to attention disorders. Others inherit dispositions to diabetes, or heart disease. These factors of how our very bodies are constituted have an ENORMOUS influence on what sort of person you turn out to be.

(3) Consider the third (our upbringing). What things you were told by your parents, how they cared for you as a child, what your teachers told you, what your classmates were like, what your friends were like, what sorts of information you had access to, and what sorts of experiences you had—all of these factors have an ENORMOUS influence on what sort of person you turn out to be.

Conclusion: The factors just listed are VAST in number. It should be quite clear, even to the person who thinks that we DO have free will, that a GREAT MANY factors surrounding our lives are outside of our control, and that these factors play an enormous role in influencing how we act.

Holbach believes that the factors above are the ONLY ones that influence how we act. But, if ALL of the factors that influence how we act are outside of our control, then WE ARE NEVER IN CONTROL OF OUR ACTIONS. Indeed, it is difficult to think of how one could act while NOT swayed by the factors listed above.

These factors make it such that the habits man forms are outside of his control, and even the IDEAS and THOUGHTS that he has occur involuntarily. There is nothing that occurs to us that is not ultimately swayed by factors outside of our control. Therefore, man is not free at all. "Nevertheless, in spite of the shackles by which he is bound, it is pretended he is a free agent."

2. The Illusion of Freedom: It does SEEM as if we are free, though. Holbach mentions a number of scenarios that give the illusion of freedom:

1. When we change our minds: Often, we feel swayed to do one thing, but later, we may change our minds and do the opposite. This demonstrates that we are free.

Reply: What is happening here is that first one impulse affects the brain, and then some OTHER impulse affects it. If we looked closely enough, we would ALWAYS see that changing one's mind is always accompanied by some new or changing factor that overrides the original impulse or factor. Consider:

Imagine that we are swayed by intense thirst, we may refuse to drink water if we are told that it is poisoned. But, notice that this change of mind occurs because of the NEW FACTOR; namely, that we become aware that it is poisoned. The original desire to drink is outside of our control because of our uncontrollable urge of thirst, and the later desire to NOT drink is outside of our control because of our uncontrollable urge for self-preservation.

2. When we resist our urges: But, sometimes, we might resist our urges WITHOUT such factors. For instance, we might resist drinking water even if it is NOT poisoned. This demonstrates that we are free.

Reply: This will only occur if the person's HISTORY has been the sort that encourages this sort of behavior. For instance, perhaps this person was taught by parents or teachers to resist urges, etc. Holbach asks of such a person, "has his education, the examples set before him, the ideas which he has been inspired in early life, been suitable to make him contract this habit of repressing desires?"

3. I can demonstrate my own freedom: It is argued that, if you like, I can demonstrate my own freedom with my hand. I have the ability to choose whether or not to move my hand. The result is not pre-determined. If I do not move my hand, I have chosen this freely.

Reply: It may SEEM to this person that he is doing something free, but really the true motive of their action is the desire to convince their determinist opponent. The act is not really a free one. He writes that, even if this person threw themselves out of a window and committed suicide, "it would not be a sufficient warranty to conclude that he acted freely." Rather, even this is merely the result of the desire of an especially violent or self-destructive person to demonstrate their own freedom.

4. Action without obstacles: Some say that, just as long as one acts without being hindered by any obstacle, one acts freely. But, this happens all the time.

Reply: Even if there is no APPARENT obstacle hindering some desire or idea, we must ask: How did the desire or idea get there in the first place? Really, it is the case that all ideas or desires are the direct result of some external event in the world, or some internal event in the mind—and these are all outside of our control. For they, too, are the cause of some prior event; and as we go back and back to prior causes, there is no point at which we are free or in control of those events. He writes,

Man believes he acts as a free agent, every time he does not see any thing that places obstacles to his actions; he does not perceive that the motive which causes him to will, is always necessary and independent of himself.

Consider a falling stone. Though it falls unhindered, we do not say it is free to do anything but fall. But, man unhindered is just like that.

3. The Source of our Error: Ultimately, the reason we mistakenly think that we are free is because the mechanism that controls our actions is SO complicated that we do not ever really detect exactly how and in what ways we are being controlled. But, "if this machine were less complicated, he would perceive that all his actions were necessary."

Note: Consider the way that a computer generates a "random" number. It uses an algorithm that is SO complicated that we cannot predict the number generated. Nevertheless, one could calculate that number with certainty if they knew the mechanism (algorithm) that determined it.

Or, consider the [Game of Life](#) program. What happens after pushing start is "unpredictable" in the sense that it is complex or unexpected. But, the results are actually 100% predictable if you know the four simple laws that the program follows.

4. Freedom is Absurd: The very idea that we are free doesn't even make sense. Literally, it would mean "to move one's self by one's self" or "to determine one's self without cause." But, a self-generated, causeless action is senseless. Holbach's conclusion is as follows:

In short, the actions of man are never free; they are always the necessary consequence of his temperament, of the received ideas, and of the notions, either true or false, which he has formed to himself of happiness, of his opinions, strengthened by example, by education, and by daily experience.

This is the view called 'hard determinism'.

Hard Determinism: All of our actions are determined (i.e., they are the product of the laws that govern the universe, in conjunction with our genetic dispositions, previous experiences, and so on—none of which we are in control of), and we do NOT have free will.

5. Indeterminism to the Rescue?: According to the hard determinist, EVERYTHING is determined by the laws of nature. Physicists tell us that particles and bodies are governed by certain laws. But, human beings are just bits of matter clumped together in certain ways—so THEY TOO are governed by the laws of nature. So, in theory, if we knew ALL of the facts about how things were, say, a billion years ago, and we knew ALL of the laws, a hard determinist would tell you that they would then be able to accurately predict EXACTLY what you will do in the very next moment.

These days, many physicists tell us that some events are NOT determined by the physical laws, however. For instance, when a radioactive isotope decays, it is said that there is NO reason or cause for its decay and that the timing of its decay is undetermined. Though the collection of atoms as a whole decay at roughly a fixed rate, when each INDIVIDUAL atom decays is not determined by the physical laws.

So, if determinism is false, then Holbach is wrong after all! There IS room for free will! (see, e.g., [Michio Kaku's comment](#), "in some sense we do have some kind of free will.")

Objection: No. This is a great example of a good scientist doing bad philosophy. An undetermined event is merely a RANDOM event. This cannot be the source of freedom. A free action is one that we are *responsible for or in control of*. But, an undetermined action would be one that *nothing* is responsible for (there is no cause), and *nothing* is in control of. As such, if quantum indeterminacy ever resulted in, say, the undetermined movement of my arm, the result would merely be an involuntary spasm, outside of my control. Such a free movement is NOT what we mean by 'free'.