

Discuss the free will and determinism debate with reference to two or more psychological theories

The free will and determinism question has been debated by Western philosophers for centuries. Intuition tells us that we have the ability to choose our actions, that is, we determine our own behaviour (we have free will). But this freedom is constrained by physical, social, political and other factors. But according to positivistic, mechanistic, scientific psychology, behaviour is determined by external events, and so people aren't free. Determinism also implies that things can only happen as they do, because everything is caused and every cause is itself the effect of some other cause. This includes people and their thoughts and behaviour, which are no different from other 'things' or events.

Both free will and determinism are ambiguous concepts. Free will can mean having a choice (implying that things could have been different from the way they turn out), not being coerced or constrained (as in having a gun to your head), voluntary behaviour (as opposed to involuntary or reflex), and deliberate control (as opposed to automatic behaviour). The voluntary nature of behaviour is illustrated by Penfield's (1947) classic experiments in which he stimulated the cortex of conscious patients undergoing brain surgery, and Delgado's (1969) stimulation of a patient's motor cortex. A demonstration of people's belief in their free will is psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966). Norman & Shallice (1986) proposed three levels of divided attention: fully automatic processing, partially automatic processing, and deliberate control. Deliberate control corresponds to free will, and as we move downwards from conscious control, so the subjective experience of freedom diminishes (Koestler, 1967).

Psychologists are interested in the concepts of free will and determinism for a variety of reasons. Definitions of abnormality, and the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders, often involve judgements about free will and determinism. Also, the assumption that people have free will underlies the whole question of legal and moral responsibility.

Some of the most influential theories in the whole of psychology have given considerable attention to the debate, including those of Freud and Skinner. According to Strachey (1962), Freud believed in the universal validity of the law of determinism, which he extended from physical to mental phenomena. Freud saw himself very much as a scientist, and all his work in science was founded on the strong belief in the principle of cause and effect. Psychical or psychological phenomena are rigidly and lawfully determined by this principle (psychic determinism) (Sulloway, 1979). Part of what 'psychic determinism' conveyed was that there are no accidents. That is, however random or irrational behaviour may appear to be (such as parapraxes or Freudian slips), unconscious causes can always account for them. This also applies to hysterical symptoms and dreams.

Skinner, like Freud, saw free will as an illusion. For Skinner, this is because free will, like all other references to mental (private) states, has no part to play in the explanation of behaviour (radical behaviourism). It's an 'explanatory fiction'. Free will cannot be defined or measured objectively, nor is it needed for successful prediction and control of behaviour – the primary aims of a science of behaviour. It's only because the causes of human behaviour are often hidden from us in the environment that the myth or illusion of free will survives. When what we do is dictated by force or punishment, or by negative reinforcement, it's obvious that we're not acting freely. But most of the time we're unaware of environmental causes, and we feel as if we're behaving freely. But all this means is that we're free of the punishments or negative reinforcements. Our behaviour is still determined by past positive reinforcements.

Freud's belief in determinism is, ironically, demonstrated by the importance he attached to the psychoanalytic technique of free association. 'Free association' is a misleading

translation of the German 'freier Einfall', an uncontrollable 'intrusion' by pre-conscious ideas into conscious thinking. In turn, this pre-conscious material reflects unconscious material. It's because the causes of our thoughts, actions and supposed choices are unconscious (and so, by definition, unknown to us) that we believe we're free. This parallels Skinner's belief that we think we're free because we're often ignorant of the environmental causes of our behaviour (especially the past positive reinforcements that we're pursuing now). According to Gay (1988), Freud's theory of mind is 'strictly and frankly deterministic'. But Freud accepted that true accidents can and do occur, that is, forces beyond the victim's control (such as being struck by lightning). One aspect of psychic determinism is overdetermination. Much of our behaviour has multiple causes, both conscious and unconscious. So, although our conscious choices, decisions and intentions may genuinely influence behaviour, they never tell the whole story. Freud believed that the unconscious causes are the more important and interesting part of the story, but there's still room for some degree of freedom.

One of the aims of psychoanalysis is to give the patient's ego freedom to decide one way or another. So, therapy rests on the belief that people can change, although Freud saw this change as very limited. Freud often explained his patients' choices, neurotic symptoms and so on not in terms of causes (the scientific argument), but by trying to make sense of them and give them meaning (the semantic argument). This is reflected in the title of arguably his greatest book, the 'Interpretation (not Cause) of Dreams (1900)'.

Skinner's belief that free will is an illusion conflicts with the need to attribute people with free will if we're to hold them – and ourselves – morally and legally responsible for their actions. Skinner himself acknowledges this in 'Beyond Freedom and Dignity' (1971), but he rejects the idea of 'autonomous man'. Skinner equates 'good' and 'bad' with 'beneficial to others' (what's rewarded) and 'harmful to others' (what's punished) respectively. 'Oughts' aren't 'moral imperatives' that is, things we're obliged to do for moral or ethical reasons, but reflect practical guidelines and rules (Morea, 1990). A further consequence of Skinner's rejection of 'autonomous man' is the 'behaviour therapist's dilemma' (Ringen, 1996). This refers to having to choose between the belief in radical behaviourism as the most appropriate framework for behaviour therapy, and the doctrine of informed consent (based on people's ability to act autonomously). For both Freud and Skinner, belief in determinism seems to fit best with the scientific view of the world. But James (1890) argued that this conflicts with a belief in free will required by our social, moral, political and legal practices – something which Skinner deals with directly (even if not very satisfactorily). James's solution to this conflict is, first, to distinguish between the scientific and non-scientific worlds (psychology as a science has to assume determinism, but we can accept free will in other contexts), and, second, to distinguish between soft and hard determinism. According to soft determinism, the question of free will depends on the types of cause our behaviour has. If the immediate cause is conscious mental life (CML), then our actions are free. But according to hard determinism, CML is itself caused, and as long as our behaviour is caused at all (isn't random), we cannot be described as acting freely.