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FREE WILL VS. DETERMINISM: CONTRIBUTION OF OCKHAM

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Abstract

The discussion of free will and determinism is one of the most prominent topics in philosophy, with a long history of debate. Numerous philosophers and theologians have explored this topic from various ideological perspectives, resulting in diverse, often conflicting, interpretations. This discussion resonates with many individuals, as they evaluate their behaviors through these philosophical lenses. In theology, complexities arise due to the necessity for theologians to reconcile their inquiries with their beliefs. According to Christian theology, God is omniscient and has foreknowledge of all human actions. While the concept of free will is defined in various ways, theologians struggle to provide a thorough investigation because of the complexities inherent in the concepts of omniscience and free will. However, William of Ockham, a radical theologian, approached this topic with his logical judgment, offering a significant contribution to the discourse on free will and determinism in Christian theology. His response to Aristotelian teachings on fatalism and future contingents established a stronger foundation for understanding these concepts. In this research, I examine the medieval philosophical views on free will and determinism and how Ockham addressed their contradictions.

Keywords: Free will, Determinism, Repent, Ockham, Peter

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Introduction

Metaphysics is a major discipline in philosophy, focusing on issues that are beyond sensory experience (PBS, 2020). However, it is challenging to define metaphysics simply. Originally, metaphysics sought to explore the first cause or the unchanging reality, but it has since evolved to cover various unique and interconnected areas of philosophical debate. One such aspect is free will, which is closely related to the philosophy of mind. The issue of free will is discussed within

this context (Lavazza, 2019). If the mind is considered materialistic, then free will may seem illusory (Ginet, 1990). Christian theologians approach this topic differently, as their religious thought was shaped in response to the problem of evil attributed to God. Another perspective is that if everything in human life is predestined by fate, then free will cannot exist (Hunt & Zagzebski, 2004). This indicates that free will is a philosophically significant issue that extends beyond metaphysical concerns and directly impacts moral philosophy.

The existence question inquires whether human agents truly possess free will, while the compatibility question asks whether free will can coexist with determinism (2024). Many philosophers believe that resolving the compatibility question may help answer the existence question. However, standard approaches to free will often lead to empirical and dialectical stalemates, complicating the analysis of the concept. These approaches typically rely on intuitions, which may not definitively establish the conditions for applying or referencing the concept of free will. Consequently, this makes it challenging to answer both the compatibility and existence questions. The primary objective of the is to review the various issues associated with traditional approaches to free will, which depend heavily on intuitions. The purpose is to inspire an alternative approach that does not rely on such intuitions.

Study Area

The debate on free will dates back to ancient Greek philosophy, yet there remains no clear consensus among philosophers. In the Middle Ages, the relationship between God's foreknowledge and human free will became a central concern, but no definitive basis was established to reconcile these two areas. Consequently, many theologians found the existing explanations unsatisfactory. While the works of Augustine and Aquinas stand out for their insightful approaches, they too lacked complete clarity in presenting the relationship between divine foreknowledge and free will. Nonetheless, their contributions have profoundly influenced contemporary evaluations of this enduring philosophical issue.

Philosophical and Historical Context of Free Will

The debate between free will and determinism represents one of the oldest unresolved questions in philosophy, as it deals with the attribution of responsibility for human actions (Doyle, 2016). Philosophers have long sought to understand the extent to which individuals control their behavior and the influence of external factors. This debate examines whether human actions are entirely free or strictly determined by cause-and-effect principles (McLeod, 2023). Proponents of free will assert that humans possess full autonomy in decision-making, whereas determinists argue that internal and external forces—such as environment, genetics, and past experiences—shape human behavior (Cleave, 2019). While determinism implies that free will is an illusion, it acknowledges that human behavior may be predictable but not entirely inevitable. The interplay between free will and determinism thus continues to provoke philosophical inquiry into the extent of human autonomy (McLeod, 2023).

The Common Nature of Theological and Philosophical Inquiries

Theological perspectives intersect with the debate on free will, particularly regarding the notion of divine omniscience and infallible foreknowledge (Craig, 1999). If humans have free will, it

appears to limit God's control over all actions. Conversely, if all actions align with God's will, human free will seems negated. This paradox has sparked extensive commentary from philosophers and theologians alike. Greek philosophers, for example, emphasized human accountability for actions—a concept that resonates in contemporary debates about free will and determinism (Mitsis, 2021).

In medieval Christian thought, Saint Augustine maintained that free will is compatible with God's foreknowledge, positing that evil arises not from God but from the absence of good (Solomon, Martin, & Vaught, 2008). Similarly, Saint Aquinas argued that free will does not necessitate free choice, and while the will is not determined, human agents are often responsible for their actions (Andrews, 2023). However, Christian interpretations of free will have faced criticism, particularly due to perceived contradictions with the doctrine of divine foreknowledge (Alston, 1985). Many medieval philosophers adopted forms of compatibilism, rejecting strict metaphysical libertarianism, which further enriched the discourse but also invited non-consensual examinations of free will (Baker, 2003).

Ockham's Influence on the Free Will Debate

William of Ockham emerged as a significant critic of Aristotelian philosophy during the medieval Renaissance, surpassing even Aquinas in challenging its dominance (Freddoso, 1991). His insights remain influential in both modern and contemporary thought. Ockham defended the autonomy of the human will, asserting that individuals possess the power to will freely and to reverse their intentions without external interference. According to Ockham, God's omniscience includes knowledge of future human actions but does not infringe upon human freedom (Kaye, n.d.). Ockham proposed that human will operate independently, enabling individuals to choose actions or their opposites without prior changes in intellect or external conditions. This autonomy makes individuals solely responsible for their actions, with praise or blame entirely attributable to them (Ockham, 1967/1988, pp. 319–321). Ockham's interpretations provide a clear counterpoint to the ambiguities in earlier medieval philosophy, earning widespread recognition for their enduring relevance.

Materials and Method

This study employs a qualitative analytical methodology to examine Ockham's contribution to the debate on free will versus determinism. The research involves a detailed textual analysis of Ockham's primary writings, focusing on his arguments regarding divine foreknowledge, human freedom, and moral responsibility. By critically engaging with these texts, the study seeks to evaluate how Ockham's views align with or diverge from other prominent philosophical positions of his era.

A comparative analysis will compare Ockham's perspectives with those of his contemporaries and later thinkers, identifying the distinctive elements of his philosophy. Additionally, thematic analysis will be employed to identify recurring concepts and arguments within Ockham's work that have influenced subsequent debates on free will and determinism. The broader theological context of Ockham's thought will also be considered, particularly how his views on divine omniscience and human agency intersect with his nominalist philosophy.

This methodological framework aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Ockham's role in shaping the discourse on free will and determinism, while offering insights into his enduring relevance to contemporary philosophical discussions.

Results and Discussion

This section examines William of Ockham's contributions to the free will versus determinism debate, synthesizing insights from his primary writings, contemporary interpretations, and philosophical critiques. Ockham's integration of logical rigor and theological considerations provides a framework for reconciling human autonomy with divine foreknowledge.

Identify Free Will

Free will refers to an individual's freedom to act according to their own will. It encompasses the ability to choose an option freely and to exercise that choice without external influence. This freedom allows individuals to make decisions based on their understanding of right and wrong. Without free will, a person would be unable to distinguish between good and evil (Bitesize, 2024).

While it is true that humans must have the freedom to choose (Amadae, 2021), this freedom alone does not suffice. It is essential to present evidence confirming that one's choice is made freely. Additionally, it must be demonstrated that the primary driver of an individual's intentions is indeed their choice. This involves proving that decisions are not only systematic but also random, thereby reflecting the existence of free will.

The question also arises as to whether individual liberty itself constitutes an act of free will. A person might justify their actions by claiming that they always act righteously. If free will were the only factor, this statement could not be challenged. However, if everyone in society acted solely according to their own freedom, it would be impossible to predict the consequences. Thus, free will is not merely about acting freely; it also involves acting under some form of authoritative control (O'Connor & Franklin, 2022).

The question then becomes why a person should be guided by authoritative power to achieve significant control over their actions. The established code of ethics within society distinguishes between good and evil in human actions (The Ethics Centre, 2019). An infant, for instance, is incapable of controlling their actions because they lack the will to do so. Similarly, when a man is attacked by a dog, he does not retaliate because the dog is not responsible for its actions. As a person matures and gains knowledge, they develop self-control, which is essential for living in society. Actions that may have been acceptable in primitive societies are no longer appropriate today because the understanding of free will evolves over time (Lewis, 1979). This knowledge must be authoritative, as it should also possess the ability to control individual actions (O'Connor & Franklin, 2022).

If free will can be interpreted in this way, can it not solve the problem at hand? However, the existence of such control inevitably raises various questions regarding the nature and existence of free will (Balaguer, 2014). For instance, is there freedom to act in a way that is truly free and unique to humans? Do individuals possess the power of self-determination in all their actions? Is

free will be necessary for moral responsibility? What is the true significance of human dignity? These questions suggest that free will is an issue that defies simple explanation.

What is the Deterministic Foundation?

It is widely accepted that humans must have free will. However, the question arises: do people truly act according to their free will? When we examine an action closely, we realize that it is not a simple act but rather one influenced by various interconnected factors. For instance, the freedom to vote is a norm, but do voters cast their ballots freely? In Sri Lanka, for example, numerous factors influence voting behavior, including religion, race, caste, class, social status, wealth, and the abuse of power through violence, thuggery, theft, fraud, and incitement to conflict (Fernando, 2019). Given these influences, it is difficult to say that decisions based on such factors are fully a matter of free will. Even when purchasing a low-value item for personal use, individuals are influenced by a range of factors. This reveals that many actions and decisions are not entirely voluntary.

Such situations are not limited to everyday life but also extend to theoretical domains. For example, science operates on the basis of assumptions, with everything that has happened or will happen being dependent on these assumptions. The present is similarly shaped by deterministic factors. If we consider the laws governing the natural world, we assume they operate according to deterministic causal laws, a concept made clear by Charles Darwin's scientific worldview. According to Darwin, humans are a part of nature, and thus, everything they do is governed by deterministic factors. As a result, free will is considered an illusion (Eldredge & Eldredge, 2013).

Determinism asserts that the laws of nature are established before any human action occurs. This interpretation suggests that nothing can be done to alter these laws, and nothing more can be added to or subtracted from them. Furthermore, it is impossible to determine when these laws will manifest. Consequently, it can be inferred that while a hypothetical agent may be aware of these laws, they are powerless to change them. Therefore, one could conclude that this agent does not act freely, and since the argument is universally applicable, no one acts freely in a deterministic universe.

René Descartes, who laid the foundation against determinism and its threat to human freedom, argued that while determinism dictates physical events through dualism, free will still exists because the soul is immaterial (Astore, 2016). He emphasized that human actions are free and that individuals have the freedom to choose alternatives that cannot be determined by any external agent. The idea that free thought is crucial for the survival of society is a key concept in modern and contemporary philosophy (Wikipedia Contributors, 2024). Thus, it is evident that determinism alone does not fully negate human free will.

Basic Arguments on Free Will and Determinism

The debate between free will and determinism centers on whether human actions are determined by prior causes or if individuals possess the freedom to choose their actions independently. Determinism posits that all events, including human actions, are the result of preceding causes governed by natural laws or divine will, leaving no room for true freedom. In contrast, the concept of free will argues that individuals have the capacity to make choices that are not predetermined, thus holding moral responsibility for their actions. This conflict raises questions about the nature

of human agency, the extent of personal responsibility, and the compatibility of divine omniscience with human freedom.

The debate on free will and determinism involves three primary arguments: strict determinism, free thought, and compatibilism. Additionally, fatalism, though related, also shares a deterministic nature.

Strict Determinism

Strict determinists assert that everything in the world is predetermined, including human actions, because all events follow a definite and unchangeable order (Ginet, 1966).

- If determinism is true, then all human actions result from past events and the laws of nature.
- Humans cannot alter the laws of nature or change the past; they can only act according to these predetermined factors.
- Therefore, if determinism is true, free will does not exist.

Free Thought

Advocates of free thought argue that while humans must endure the consequences of their freedom, whether for better or worse—these consequences can be changed (McKenna & Derk Pereboom, 2016).

- A person acts of their own free will only if they are the ultimate source of their actions.
- If determinism is true, no one can be the ultimate source of their actions.
- Therefore, if determinism is true, no one acts out of free will.

Compatibilism

Compatibilists maintain that free will and determinism can coexist, but they acknowledge that it may be necessary to reject either free will or determinism to resolve the tension between the two (Kane, 1998).

- An agent acts freely only if they are the initiator (or the finisher) of their actions.
- If determinism is true, then every action an agent takes is ultimately the result of events and circumstances beyond their control.
- If all actions are governed by events and circumstances beyond the agent's control, then the agent cannot be considered the initiator (or the finisher) of their actions.
- Therefore, if determinism is true, no agent possesses free will.

Okhamian Analysis of Free Will and Determinism

Inquiries have been made using Peter the Disciple by Ockham, which focuses on human freedom. Ockham uses Peter's statement in the Bible that he would not betray Jesus at the Last Supper as the basis for his argument about free will. The subsequent events, including Jesus' reply and Peter's repentance, are used to explain the nature of free will. According to Ockham, God had foreknowledge of Peter's actions and would ultimately deliver him (William et al., 1983). In simpler terms, the statement made at the Last Supper was made with foresight, and God knew that Peter would repent of his rejection on Good Friday. It follows that Peter is free to repent.

The argument that Peter does not freely repent can be explained as follows (William et al., 1983):

- i. God knows that Peter will repent on Good Friday.
- ii. Peter is free to repent only if he cannot repent otherwise, implying that Peter must have repented.

If God knew that Peter would repent, then Peter must have repented. This is not contingent. The reason is that Peter could not act contrary to what was known. That is, repentance is true if God knows that Peter will repent. One's false pretenses do not alter this truth. God's knowledge is unchanging. If Peter had failed to repent, it would imply that God was deceived, but this contradicts Ockham's assertion of God's infallibility (Maarten Hoenen, 2021).

The obvious conclusion of this argument is that Peter did not repent of his own free will. The question that arises is about the nature of free will if God has eternal knowledge of all things, including the future. Ockham offers a solution that is accepted by many theologians and philosophers, especially in contemporary discussions. He argues that this depends on understanding the nature of necessity within God's foreknowledge. According to Ockham, there is a necessity for Peter to repent because he had rejected his teacher three times. Identifying these necessities has been explained by Ockham in two ways:

- i. Essentially, if God knows something, it is true.
- ii. If God knows that something is true, then it is essentially true.

Although these statements may seem similar, they are fundamentally different. For example: Nothing can be done differently than how it happens. In epistemology, students explore how faith and knowledge intersect (Ichikawa & Steup, 2017). One statement suggests that trust should be developed through knowledge, which is a valid basis. This prevents knowing anything false. Accordingly, the existing claim regarding the above two propositions is distinct. Ockham believes that the second type of proposition affects human free will, and this must be understood.

To further explain Ockham's argument:

- i. Essentially, if it is true that someone is a graduate, then they can get a graduate appointment.
- ii. If their degree is true, it is essentially true that they can get a graduate appointment.

The first proposition is straightforward: it is not possible to be a graduate without having graduated. The second proposition is stronger, stating that it is essential to have a degree; without a degree, the status of being a graduate is mandatory.

Another example:

- i. Essentially, if you know that the Pope is in the Vatican, then it is true that the Pope is there.
- ii. If you know that the Pope is in the Vatican, it is essential that the Pope is there.

The first premise defines what it means to know about the Pope's location. The second premise implies that the Pope's residence in the Vatican is essential and cannot be altered. If this were not the case, it would be an inevitable falsehood.

The connection between Peter's repentance and God's foreknowledge illustrates the plausible form of Ockham's argument:

- i. If God knew that Peter would repent on Good Friday, then Peter would repent on Friday. (True)
- ii. If God knew that Peter would repent on Good Friday, then it would be false that Peter repents. (False)

How can the second proposition be false? What is its logical basis? The key is realizing that freedom involves only the ability to deceive God. Ockham explains this nature as follows:

- i. God knows that Peter will repent.
- ii. Therefore, Peter will indeed repent on Friday.

However, Ockham has provided an explanation for the second statement above (William et al., 1983). Peter's repentance is a voluntary act, and his penance continues. Thus, whether Peter repents or not depends solely on his own power. This leads to the conclusion that:

If Peter did not repent on Good Friday, God would not have had the beliefs described in the initial prophecy. Consequently, God would have predicted that Peter would not repent on Good Friday.

An incident involving Peter can be inferred here: Jesus believed that Peter would care for the church entrusted to him. Peter appointed Paul to assist him, a belief held by other elders in the church. However, if John had been chosen instead of Paul, it could lead to contradictions. For instance, if the church had come to believe that Peter deceived them by appointing John, it would imply a loss of trust in Peter, leading to confusion within the church.

Ockham asserts that if Peter repents freely of his own volition, God will always believe that Peter will repent (William et al., 1983). However, God's eternal belief is that if Peter repents freely, he will not repent. This is a simple and clear statement, yet it can be contested as untrue or never true. It is also true that God knows a person will be saved, but it could be argued that God never knew this person would be saved. Ockham's conclusion is that God's knowledge of the future does not necessitate human choices (Zagzebski, 2017). Instead, it is crucial that human will, and actions align with what God knows to be true, meaning that the right action must be chosen.

Conclusion

The philosophical discourse on free will and determinism remains one of the most enduring and complex debates in both philosophy and theology. Despite centuries of exploration across diverse traditions, a definitive resolution continues to elude scholars. Christian theology, rooted in the narrative of the Fall of Adam, traditionally upholds that God endowed humanity with free will to choose between good and evil. However, the coexistence of divine omniscience and human freedom raises a profound paradox: if God knows every human action, how can humans truly possess free will?

Theologians such as St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Leibniz have offered nuanced interpretations to reconcile this tension, each contributing significantly to the discourse. Among these, William of Ockham provides a groundbreaking perspective through his logical analysis and theological insights. Diverging from the deterministic inclinations of medieval Aristotelian thought, Ockham emphasizes human autonomy and the voluntarist dimension of free

will. By doing so, he bridges the gap between divine foreknowledge and human agency, asserting that God's knowledge of the future does not necessitate predetermined human actions.

Ockham's contributions have profoundly influenced both modern and contemporary philosophy and theology, highlighting the enduring relevance of his ideas. His innovative approach to voluntarism and determinism continues to inspire critical inquiry into the nature of human freedom, moral responsibility, and the intricate relationship between the divine and the human.

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