

A Disquisition of the Natural Determinism of Man in Paul Henri Thiry (Baron) d'Holbach

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at critically evaluating Holbach's concept of the natural determinism of man, which when juxtaposed with human freewill exposes the limitations of the latter and renders freewill illusory. This is because the idea of freewill is predicated upon the assumption that man possesses the ability to make choices and decisions that are devoid of external predispositions either by his environment, genetic factors or even God. If man's decisions are so uninfluenced then he is morally responsible for his actions and inactions. Conversely, determinism holds that human behaviors are influenced by certain causal laws which render freewill a farce and an illusion. Hard determinists like Holbach maintains that man's belief in the freedom of his will is borne out of his ignorance of what transpires in his soul during dilemmatic choice making occasions. However, this study, which adopts the literary analysis and expository methods of enquiry, takes a philosophical leaning on metaphysical libertarianism, which allows for man's freedom, responsibility and a fortiori such that the past does not determine a unique future. The researchers therefore suggest that freewill is a reality, which is compatible with soft determinism and without which we find that liberty which underpins our laws and the rationale behind the law, punishments and even rewards are diminished.

KEYWORD: Disquisition, Freewill, Determinism, Liberty and Illusion.

Introduction

A disquisition assignment necessarily requires a systematic study of its subject(s) in order to come up with a novel conclusion. Relating the above to our present paper, the researchers critically examine d' Holdbach's natural determinism of man. This 18th century thinker upheld the tenets of hard determinism which hold that freedom is an illusion. He espoused the idea that human behavior is a consequence of influences on man by his environment and other genetic factors. The contemporary version of hard determinism is upheld by certain behaviorists, who also hold that moral responsibility exists. Their opposing school of thought are supporters of William James, who identity freedom with autonomy. These include: The Stoics, Spinoza and others like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and David Hume. These men gave their support to the freedom of spontaneity. Liberty for them, represents the power of doing or refraining from any action that derives from one's will so that by choosing otherwise, one would have done a different thing, which means an agent loses his liberty when induced into any action or compelled into acting from his will.

On the other hand, metaphysical libertarians like the Epicureans maintain freedom of indifference and held that responsible choices are those that are undetermined by circumstances antecedent to them. This latter school of thought believes that people are free, responsible and *a fortiori*, that the past does not determine any special future. A careful examination of the foregoing argument indicates that freedom of man's will is at the epicenter of this discussion. There are therefore two glaring elements common to all interpretations of the word, free. To be free is therefore seen as necessarily demanding the absence of determinism or certain elements of determinism. Again, the impression is that one can only act or choose freely that which can be rightly described as one's own without outside interference or influences of any kind.

The freewill problem massively developed as we can see around the foregoing hence, there is the need to find out if moral responsibility requires any sort of personal freedom and if it actually does so, what sort of freedom does it require? Questions such as: Is it true that people are practically free? Is practical freedom consistent with a prior determination of actions, thoughts and character? Are we determined or free? These questions stare us at the face. Whatever we reply as answers must revolve around our meaning of freewill. Freedom here therefore espouses the idea that we freely and in an unhindered and uncoarsed manner, chose or make particular decisions without the influences of our genetic makeup, parental upbringing, psychological and religious factors. However, philosophers have over the years raised issues surrounding our freedom of choice (freewill) and the result is the determinism theory, which utterly rejects man as a free agent and Holbach's version of determinism is here placed in the dock.

Our focus in this paper is on the views of one of the chief proponents of this concept of determinism namely, Baron d' Holbach, who believes that human choices and actions are controlled by the same physical laws that govern the universe. If this is the case, how then can humanity be held responsible for their actions? Put differently, why do we punish offenders or give reward for a good that is done?

Our paper in response to these afore-stated queries, undertakes a critical examination of Holbach's natural determinism of man. At the end of our disquisition, we established the possibility of freewill as a reality-an idea (of the metaphysical libertarians) which also is still compatible with the tenets of soft determinism. In order to achieve this and having thus far introduced our topic, we embarked on a delineation of the meanings and references of both freewill and determinism with the aim of locating their nexus (if any) and pointing out their divergences. We then ran a survey of the argument surrounding determinism from ancient to contemporary periods. We furthered by exploring Paul d' Holbach's perspectives on the natural determinism of man before advancing our critical comments on his position, which its lacuna, is in this work filled with our proposal which recognizes the reality of freewill and its comfortable compatibility with soft determinism.

A Reconnaissance of the Concepts of Freewill and Determinism

Freewill, that notional capacity or ability to choose between different possible courses of action unimpeded is to be understood in this context as the capacity of man to make choices which are free from any constraints. This implies that to say that one is free to perform an action means that there is no obstacle to such man which impedes or prevents him from doing what he wants to do. When man's actions or inactions are unaffected or uninfluenced by physical constraints (imprisonment) or disabilities, social factors (such as threat of punishment) or psychological factors (such as fear or compulsion) or even one's educational background, biological nature and environment, such actions are said to have derived from his freewill. But is there such freewill? It is the difficulty in dissociating freely-willed actions from the afore-identified constraints that have led philosophers to argue as do determinists, that there is no such thing as freewill.

That said, there are glaring attitudes of human beings that enforce the idea of freewill. Such elements like man's actions, motivations, deliberation, choice and intention are all sampled as indices to adjudge the neutrality of freewill from any constraint or control. The proponents of free will, who make a big case for the

reality of the principle chiefly belong to the libertarianism school of thought. As Stroll and Poplin put it, “everybody is aware of his own freedom. Even if someone can predict the choices I am going to make, when I make these choices, I feel that I am free” (1981, 109).

Taking it a bit further, the belief in freewill holds that wherever we make choices, there is this consciousness of freedom in us, and an awareness which is beyond our denial. Sartre however asserts for instance, that man’s freedom is not something that belongs to the will but that “what we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of human reality..., freedom is being human (1996, 93). Briefly put, freedom of the will seems to suggest that as rational beings, humanity possesses that capacity to decide or deliberate on what to do in certain situations and no matter the outcome of his actions, he would have acted without any form of influence and is therefore morally responsible for these actions. In any case, Maurice Merleau Ponty later criticized this sartrean ascription of an absolute status to freedom.

On the other hand, Audi (1999, 197) tells us that an opposing concept to freewill namely, determinism, is the view that the state of the world at any instant determines a unique future. This theory holds that knowledge of all the positions of things and the prevailing natural forces would permit an intelligence to predict the future’s state of the world with absolute precision. This idea was initially articulated by Lapley in the 19th century having been inspired by Sir Isaac Newton’s success at integrating our physical knowledge of the world. Determinism therefore represents the philosophical thesis which holds that freewill is not only an illusion but also a product of the government of laws of the universe which are the same laws that influence human behavior and actions. This version of determinism is synonymous with causal determinism, which espouses the idea that nothing is without a cause.

However, there are two variants of determinism namely, soft and hard determinism. Hard determinism completely rejects the notion of freewill and conceives man as part of nature that cannot be exempted from the influences of natural laws, hence, forces independent of us create desires that determine our actions and behaviours. Baron d’ Holbach belongs to this school of thought and conceives freewill as simply a modification of the brain.

On the contrary, soft determinism or compatibilism, refers to the position that approves the truism of casual determinism but holds that man still acts as free, morally and responsible agent when in the absence of external constraints. Our desires they say, cause our actions. To an extent, compatibilism does not strictly maintain that humans are free. (Popkin & Stroll, 1981). It is pertinent at this point to note that freewill is not necessarily the opposite of determinism rather, it’s opposite is indeterminism, a position championed by the pragmatist, William James. James posits that natural laws are not as consistent as science would have us believe hence, occurrences sometimes take place not out of necessity but by chance. He explains that between two options, both may be possible, but one becomes impossible only when the other excludes it by becoming real itself (Holbach & James, 1977). Chance, in the light of James’ reasoning, means that something is not guaranteed, that an event could turn out the way one never expected. We shall now redirect our attention to theorizations on determinism from ancient to contemporary periods of philosophy.

Theorizations on Determinism from Ancient to the Contemporary Periods

Under this subheading, we will attempt to discuss the views of namely, The Stoics, St. Augustine, Thomas Hobbes and Saul Smilansky on determinism.

The Stoics

The Stoics conception of determinism is that which was supported by logic. They held that statements about the future are either true or false. For instance, either she goes to school tomorrow or she will not. For them, the two statements cannot be true as only one will turn to be true. Future events they believe, either occur or not. Thus, future events are all determined. Diodorus Cronus, a Stoic philosopher in his *Historical*

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introduction to Philosophy/ Determinism and the Problem of Freewill reiterates that, whenever something happens, it was going to happen before it actually happened. Therefore, nothing is going to happen except what actually ends up happening. This means no person can choose to do anything because once they have done something that was what they were going to do, and there was no “maybe” as to whether or not they were going to do. (Historical Introduction and Encyclopedia of World Biography, nd).

The above betrays a chronic form of hard determinism. The Stoics therefore completely rejects the idea of having the ability to make choices. Although the views of the Stoics are said to be fatalistic in nature, their belief can be said to have been replayed in Baron D’ Holbach’s assertion that man “is not master of the thought presented to his mind, which determines his will; this thought is excited by some cause independent of himself” (1977, 290).

St. Augustine

Another philosopher in the medieval period, who upheld the principle of determinism is St. Augustine. He based his arguments on the omniscience of God and maintains that God has fore-knowledge of one’s acts in the future and this makes it difficult to make choices that were not foreseen by God. Human will for St. Augustine, is corrupt and depraved consequent upon the fall hence, man is at the mercy of God. He enumerated three causes namely; (i) Events caused by chance, (ii) Those caused by God (iii) Those caused by man. Things or events like death he says, are beyond our control but leading a good life or not is a decision we make for ourselves. Augustine therefore does not reject freewill outrightly but believes that God knows of those acts we will freely choose to perform. St. Augustine can be referred to as a soft determinist.

Thomas Hobbes & Saul Smilansky

Besides, the next philosopher to be considered is Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes just like Holbach was a materialist, who rejected the idea of an immaterial soul. He (like other materialists) believes that nature is all that there is and matter is the only thing that exists. On the principle of determinism, Hobbes differs from Holbach in that he refutes the idea of natural laws or forces as what control human behavior but he posits that all our thoughts and actions stem from the movements of particles around the brain. He explains that these particles obey the same physical laws that all matter obey. The only kind of freedom’ that exists he says, is the free movement of matter in its natural way without any external influence obstructing it. It is worthy of note that Hobbes did not rightly discard freewill, but stated two conditions that qualify an action as free. These are: (i) That we desire to perform the action, and (ii) Nothing may restrain us. Thus, Hobbes can be classified as a soft determinist (Historical Introduction, nd).

Philosophers after him held that his theory resolved the freewill problem. Additionally, a contemporary Philosopher by name, Saul Smilansky went ahead to assert that there is no freewill “but that we must keep it a secret from the masses” (Smilansky, 2016). He believes that if people were to know that their behavior was already determined, they would act irrationally and immorally. Let us now run a detailed survey of Holbach’s views on the determination of man.

The Natural Determinism of Man in Paul d’ Holbach

Holbach is mainly known for his atheism. His works *System De la Nature* and *Le Bons Sens* are mainly criticism of particular claims about God especially the traditional descriptions of God such as His infinite nature. It is for this reason that he counted among those who upheld materialism, which is the belief that matter is all that there is. For Holbach, matter and motion are what constitute nature, while nature is a sequence of causes and effects (Holbach, 1770).

He further says that, “the universe, that vast assemblage of everything exists, presents only matter and motion: the whole offers to our contemplation nothing but an immense an uninterrupted succession of causes

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and effects” (Holbach, 1977). In order to understand Holbach’s theory of how human behaviours are naturally determined, one must have a grasp of his metaphysics because he considers man to be intertwined with the universe. Thus, he is not just a materialist but a mechanistic materialist.

Mechanistic materialism is the theory that considers all phenomena (both minds and its operations) as the only being conceivable in terms of scientific laws of chemistry and physics. In other words, an event can only be explained in the context of matter, motion and the laws which describe their combination. In his account of man, Holbach submitted that;

...man is as a whole, the result of a certain combination of matter, endowed by particular properties, competent to give, capable of receiving, certain impulses, the arrangement of which is called organization, of which the essence is, to feel, to think, to act, to move, after a manner distinguished from other beings with which he can be compared. Man, therefore, ranks in an order, in a system, in a class by himself, which differs from that of other animals, in whom we do not perceive those properties of which he is possessed” (Holbach, 1820-21).

Although man is part and parcel of the universe, he accords him a place different from all other matter. This is due to the fact that man possesses “thought and freedom” which are not found in any other matter. This is the reason he says that “man is in a class by himself”. In any case, he believes that human nature should be conceived or explained in terms of laws and that human actions cannot be understood except in the context of universal determinism. Furthermore, Holbach views matter and motion in terms of cause and effect. He groups bodies with causes and motions with effects, but sometimes, he identifies motions with causes. In his own words, he reiterates that “a cause is a being which puts another in motion, or which produces some change in it. The effect is the change produced in one body by the motion or presence of another”. (Standford Encyclopedia, nd). Materialists are apt to explain human nature) in the light of the same laws that govern the rest of nature, but this is not the case with Holbach. He based his ideas of the determinism of human behaviour and action on a physiological explanation. It is on this ground that he asserts that the will is a modification of the brain and the basis of religion.

However, it is worthy of note that the psychological theory adopted by Holbach adopts the Newtonian mechanics, which account for the motions of material bodies. This analogy demonstrates that the change in motion of a particular object will be dependent on an influence it encounters from an external force. D’ Holbach cited in Kris Wan once said that “if we accept science, then we will see that freewill is an illusion” (Kris, nd). For him, the brain of man is complication and this convinces the unreflective to believe that they are free. Holbach also maintains that the belief that man has a soul has made him think that he is a free agent. He adds that what is called “soul” is nothing but some concealed operation of the body man is unaware of.

Beside these, d’ Holbach explains that the belief in the free agency of man is as a result of misguided information regarding “the original motive of his action” (Holbach, 1820-1821). Man’s actions, he says, are determined by qualities or ideas of good or bad, painful or pleasurable impulses he receives either internally and externally. The ideas come to him involuntarily and as a result, his actions necessarily follow since he cannot do otherwise. On the issue of deliberation, when one is faced with different choices, he explains that:

When he does not act according to this impulse, it is because there comes some new cause, some new motive, some new idea, which modifies his brain in a different manner, gives him a new impulse, determines his will in another way, by which the action of the former impulse is suspended... This is the mode in which reflection, experience, reason, necessarily arrests or suspends the action of man’s will; without this he would of necessity have followed the anterior impulse which carried him toward a then desirable object (Holbach, 1977).

The example he gives to this effect is that a very thirsty man, who comes across a fountain and decides to relieve himself. If at that moment he is told the water is poisoned, he will refrain from drinking the water though dying of thirst. Holbach points out two things here; one is that the desire to quench his thirst is not his own making and secondly, the decision to abstain from drinking the poisoned water is not because the man is a free agent, but due to the fact that the same motive which made him want to drink the water at first, is the same restraining him now – that is, preservation of life. D’ Holbach views the change of mind to be as a result of the second motive out weighing the first.

D’ Holbach also posits that man’s temperaments, opinions or ideas he has formed to himself either by education or experience, his religion, government etc., render the notion of freewill an illusion. He offers another example in the process of Socrates who was murdered by his country. According to Holbach, Socrates did not act freely even when he had the opportunity to save himself. He explains that the “invisible chains of opinion, the secret love of decorum, the inward respect for the laws, even when they were iniquitous, the fear of tarnishing his glory, kept him in his prison; they were motives sufficiently powerful with his enthusiasm for virtue, to induce him to death with tranquility, it was not in his power to save himself, because he could find no potential motive to bring him to depart even for an instant, from these principles to which his mind was accustomed” (Holbach, 1977).

In a further defense of his opinions on the natural determinism of man, Holbach reveals that man carries within himself internal causes and that there is an internal organ in man which possesses its own special laws. This internal organ, he says, is determined by ideas formed by sense perceptions derived from external objects. It is worthy of note that Holbach maintains a distinction between primary and secondary qualities just as Locke did. For Locke, secondary qualities should be explained in terms of primary qualities by which relevant sensations are produced in us. The primary qualities, he also calls real qualities. Holbach differs from him in his view of primary and secondary qualities as being on the same footing. For him, primary qualities are properties possessed by all matter, while secondary qualities are properties possessed by some bodies but none is superior to the other. Holbach believes that matter is whatever makes up bodies and causes sense perceptions that we have of them. He supposes these sense perceptions or impression as the things that influence the brain of man thereby imprinting ideas on his brain. For instance, he sees the actions of a sick man looking for cures for his ailment as stemming from overpowering motives such as “the fear of pain” or “the fear of death”. These he calls “necessary motive”. In summary, Holbach reveals that if man:

...understood the play of his organs, if he were able to recall to himself all the impulsions they have received, all the modification they have undergone, all the effects they have produced, he would perceive that all his actions are submitted to fatality, which regulates his own particular systems, as it does the entire system of the universe, no one effect in him, any more than in nature, produces itself by chance; this, as has been proved, is word void of sense. All that passes by in him; all that is done by him; as well as that happens in nature..., is derived from necessary causes, which acts according to necessary laws, and which produce necessary effects from whence necessarily flow others” (1820-21).

In the light of these words, it is deduced that d’ Holbach views human actions as that which is governed by the same necessity that controls the physical world. Due to ignorance, man considers himself a free agent, not knowing that he is simply towing the course nature has mapped out for him and like a swimmer who flows with the current of the water, who sometimes uses his arms to move and other times does not, he swims on believing himself to be in charge of his movements. The use of the arms is simply as a result of the idea or motive that he may sink without use of the hands and not because he is a free agent.

A Critical Look at Holbach's Position on The Natural Determination of Man

The views of Baron D' Holbach is thought provoking in the sense that it makes one to really imagine what happens when he is challenged to decide or choose a course of action. Regarding this, it seems Holbach refutes the idea of choice making or the idea of deliberation as most hard determinists do. He differentially explains that the act of choosing one option over another is because one, impulse overpowers the other as it is the case with the thirsty man, who refrains from drinking the poisoned water. Libertarians will point to this fact as an indication that the man's action is a free one, but for Holbach, it is not so. The reason is that it is the same.

Motive played a role here but the preservation of his life which determined for him to drink the water in the first place, also made him refrain from drinking the poisoned water. Thus, for Holbach, his action cannot be termed free for his action issued out of necessity and according to the strongest desire. The reality is that what d' Holbach believes here does not apply in all cases. When one chooses to act in this way instead of that way, the motive in his own terms may not be exactly the same. For instance, Jane may choose to study medicine at the University but because her cut off marks are below the required one, she chooses Physiology instead. The motive here is already altered and we certainly cannot prove that Physiology is the course nature has mapped out for Jane to study. D' Holbach is of the opinion that scientific findings show that human behavior is determined by natural laws operating either in or outside of man. But the fact is that science deals with facts, the observable and facts can only prove facts. His ideas concerns possibilities, not facts and science cannot prove that.

Howbeit, a recent scientific discovery in modern physics has revealed that there is an element of indeterminacy in nature. This discovery known as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle reveals that: "if the position and velocity of a particle are to be experimentally determined, it is found that all experimental methods of so doing will give us the position accurately at the expense of error in the velocity determination; or will give us the velocity accurately at the expense of error in the determination of position" (Holbach, 1820-21).

The result is that both the velocity and position of the particle cannot be determined with certainty. If nature which is said to govern all matter including man is showing signs of indeterminacy, then the conception that human behavior is controlled by natural laws could also be faulty. An examination of D' Holbach's views on the ethical level also presents us with a problem, that is, the problem of guilt and remorse. Williams James in his essay on the "Dilemma of Determinism" explains that guilt and remorse or regret can only be as a result of free actions. If all our actions are determined, why do people feel they should have acted in that way and not in this way?

Again, why punish offenders or praise people for their accomplishments? Where does this leave the issue of capital punishment? It would really be pointless sentencing criminals to death, jailing them, beating up a child for a wrong done etcetera. If all our actions are determined by nature. We might as well console ourselves with the fact that we could help doing the wrong we did and what will be the state of society as a whole? The whole idea of morality becomes pointless if there is no freewill. Just like the whole idea of righteous acts is a waste if there are predestinations.

It is also worthy of note that Holbach not only considers natural laws as determining our actions, but that the past also determines human actions so much so that the present and future can be predicted. For instance, a murder if explained by a determinist, will resemble something of this nature; that the murderer was beaten by his father, kids in his school bullied him coupled with the fact that he had an angry disposition or temperament. These facts will be considered as the reason for his becoming a murderer. According to Jean Paul Sartre in his work, *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, "man is nothing else but that which he makes of

himself” (Sartre, 1996). This thought of his derives from the existentialist theme that existence precedes essence. In other words, man discovers that he exists, increases in knowledge of himself, moves up in the world and thereafter defines himself. Human life for Sartre, is a project and existence, he believes, can only be attained when one becomes what one purposes to be. For the existentialist, the murderer above is without excuse. Experience is replete with men who despite all odds became responsible people in their respective domains. Man is not only responsible for himself, but for all men. Thus, the Socratic dictum that ‘an unexamined life is not worth living’ therefore, man ought to know himself.

A further evaluation of Holbach’s thoughts reveal certain forms of pessimism. It seems to present a gloomy and hopeless picture of life as if we are completely helpless and abandoned. Murder, rape and all forms of social vices are all predetermined by nature and nurture such that there is nothing to be done by anyone. These researchers are of the opinion that this is very much questionable and completely not the case. We all have a sense of right and wrong. Engaging in actions that are hurtful to humanity should not be explained in terms of being helpless against nature’s controlling forces. If a Holbach posits that man is in a class of his own different from all other beings; capable of thought, feelings actions and movement, then he should not have reduced man to a machine. This, as far as we are concerned, is a contradiction because machines do not feel or even think as men do.

Conclusion

Thus far in this work, we have attempted to expose the problematic of freewill and Determinism, shading light on the forms of determinism that be. We furthered by undertaking a reconnaissance of both concepts of freewill and determinism which laid bare their basic characteristics. The researchers went ahead to expose the natural determinism of man as found in the thoughts of Baron d’ Holbach before attempting a critique of his views. We however rounded off our research by submitting our considered position that most of our actions are caused and such influences range from one’s upbringing, educational background to religious belief systems, societal or governmental laws and genetic makeup.

The above facts cannot be ruled out. For instance, the actions of a literate person will be different from that of an illiterate. This is because the level of exposure of the former far supersedes that of the latter. But the fact that one’s actions may be influenced by either of the above, does not rule out the idea of freedom of choice. No matter how bad tampered a man may be or dirty a past, he may have, it is no sufficient reason to destroy human lives. An acceptance of Holbach’s views is tantamount to affirming that terrorists all over the world, are determined by nature to wreak havoc on society. In a nutshell, our position is that freewill is compatible with soft determinism in the sense that there are obviously circumstances that interfere with our choices, but at the same time, we have the power to choose for ourselves and learn from those choices if a mistake occurs. Maturity or wisdom comes to play when one is able to sieve those influences, thereby sorting out the love or fear embedded in our choices. It is only in this light, that morally responsibility can be upheld.

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