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So . . . Why Did I Write This? The Delusion of Determinism

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The subversion of moral responsibility is one of the most significant developments of recent decades. Though this subversion was originally philosophical, more recent efforts have been based in biology and psychology. Various theorists have argued that our decisions and actions are determined by genetics, environmental factors, or other forces. Now, *Scientific American* is out with a report on a study linking determinism and moral responsibility.

The diverse theories of determinism propose that our choices and decisions are not an exercise of the will, but simply the inevitable outcome of factors outside our control. As *Scientific American* explains, determinists argue that “everything that happens is determined by what happened before — our actions are inevitable consequences of the events leading up to the action.”

In other words, free will doesn't exist. Used in this sense, free will means the exercise of authentic moral choice and agency. We *choose* to take one action rather than the other, and must then take responsibility for that choice.

This link between moral choice and moral responsibility is virtually instinctive to humans. As a matter of fact, it is basic to our understanding of what it means to be human. We hold each other responsible for actions and choices. But if all of our choices are illusory — and everything is merely the “inevitable consequence” of something beyond our control, moral responsibility is an exercise in delusion.

Scientific American reports on a study performed by psychologists Kathleen Vohs and Jonathan Schooler. The psychologists found that individuals who were told that their moral choices were determined, rather than free, were also more likely to cheat on an experimental examination.

As Shaun Nichols reports:

The Western conception idea of free will seems bound up with our sense of moral responsibility, guilt for misdeeds and pride in accomplishment. We hold ourselves responsible precisely when we think that our actions come from free will. In this light, it's not surprising that people behave less morally as they become skeptical of free will. Further, the Vohs and Schooler result fits with the idea that people will behave less responsibly if they regard their actions as beyond their control. If I think that there's no point in trying to be good, then I'm less likely to try.

Even if giving up on free will does have these deleterious effects, one might wonder how far they go. One question is whether the effects extend across the moral domain. Cheating in a psychology experiment doesn't seem too terrible. Presumably the experiment didn't also lead to a rash of criminal activity among those who read the anti-free will passage. Our moral revulsion at killing and hurting others is likely too strong to be dismantled by reflections about determinism. It might well turn out that other kinds of immoral behavior, like cheating in school, would be affected by the rejection of free will, however.

There are limitations to this kind of research, of course, but the report is both revealing and unsurprising. If we are not



responsible for our actions, they why would people do the right thing? The most immediate result of such thinking is the subversion of moral accountability.

Of course, this pattern of thought also renders human existence irrational. How can we understand ourselves, our children, our spouses, our friends, or our neighbors if moral responsibility is undermined by determinism. Our legal system would completely collapse, as would the entire experience of relating to other human beings.

Shaun Nichols explains that “the Western conception of free will seems bound up with our sense of moral responsibility.” That “Western conception” is a product of the Christian inheritance and the biblical worldview. The Bible clearly presents human beings as morally responsible. Christians of virtually all theological traditions — including Reformed theology, Arminianism, and Catholicism — affirm moral and spiritual responsibility and the authenticity of the experience of choice.

As a matter of fact, this capacity and accountability is rooted in the biblical concept of the *imago Dei* — the image of God. Our Creator made us as moral creatures and planted within us the capacity of conscience. All this refutes the concept of moral determinism.

In its most modern forms, determinism is a product of naturalism — the belief that everything must be explained in purely natural terms. Naturalism explains the human mind (including the experience of moral choice) as a matter of chemical reactions in the brain, and nothing more.

Determinism is implied by naturalism and relieves human beings of moral responsibility. There is no moral revolt against the Creator, no Fall, and no need for the Gospel. This subversion of moral responsibility is both a delusion and a trap. And, as the *Scientific American* report indicates, even those who say they believe in moral determinism are unable to live consistently with this assumption. We *know* we are responsible.

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