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Does freedom exist? : A short essay on ethics through the lens of naturalism

As humans, most of us instinctively strive for good. Most humans will never want to torture or hurt another living, we strive for good by exercising our freedom. Our freedom is what allows us to do whatever we want. Through freedom we can execute an action we want according to our will. If it is my will to run in circles, then I will do it. If I can do it I'm exercising my freedom, as well as my legs. However, do we need freedom to strive for an ethical world and do we really have freedom or does our genetic makeup determine everything that we will ever do?

What is freedom? Before starting to answer our questions I need to establish a base definition for freedom and ethics so we are all on the same page. In order to execute our will we must have the ability to do what we want. If one were to be physically restrained in chains and not be able to move, even if they wish, they would have no physical freedom. But for one to have physical freedom they must also have mental freedom, mental freedom would be the ability to conjure up anything in your mind with no restraint. Everyone is mentally free. Everyone has some level of freedom. I can do anything I wish (within the bounds of what is possible). However in society, one has to adhere to certain rules, you can't build anything you want, or destroy anything according to your will or there will be consequences. Even if there were no laws there would still be some level of consequence, because every action done voluntarily is an

action for or against something, if I were to eat berries that would be against the survival of the berry bush and for the survival of me, this applies to everything. As the world is in its current state, we do not have full freedom. Most people only have some level of free will. However it is enough free will to do small acts of good. Freedom is being able to speak, act or change anything without restraints, and everyone has a small level of free will.

What is ethics? When people refer to ethics they usually talk about what is good, what is ethical is what is good. Something can only be ethical when it fulfills certain conditions, such as not harming anything, or helping others. When people say someone is good, they mean that person is someone who isn't cruel, helps others, and follows rules, this person is good and ethical. Ethics is about your actions, your motive, how would this action be carried out, the circumstances, and what would the outcome mean. However it is important to note that ethics is subjective to humans because it is a human idea. For example, I could safely and without pain kill a chicken, I could season and cook this chicken and feed it to kids who can't afford food and are starving. Most people would see this as a good action because it satisfies the ethical criteria. I'm not harming anyone, I have a good intention, it has a good outcome, and I'm doing it for innocent children who are in pain. I am helping humanity. However I killed a chicken, the only reason this doesn't upset people (Excluding vegans) is because people don't care about chickens, our ethics are subjective to us. If I were to kill a dog or a human and feed it to chickens that would be unethical and perhaps even evil because it harms humans, even though it basically still satisfies the criteria, it's not beneficial to humans, therefore it's not good or ethical. Ethics are what the social system provides to us as "good". When something is done humanely, with good intention, has a good outcome, satisfies the criteria, and benefits humans it is ethical. These are our base definitions for freedom and ethics.

Can someone act ethically without freedom? Freedom gives you the ability to act, speak, have a motive, think ahead, plan consequences and gives you all the tools to carry out your will according to you if allowed to do so. In order to do something ethical you have to be able to have will as an individual. If a house were to save a person from falling trees and save their life, that house wouldn't be seen as ethical or as having a good will, because houses don't have will, they don't have the freedom to think and act and they aren't alive. Without having even the smallest bit of will, something can't be good because it can't fill out the ethical criteria, similarly the tree that almost killed a person can't be evil because it doesn't even have the basic freedom of being alive, and it can't act according to its will which it doesn't have. Without even a basic freedom such as will an agent can't act ethically, and even if something alive had freedom, unless it's human and has been raised with people, it can't act ethically because like stated before, our ethical values are subjective to human society.

John Locke, stated that all men had complete freedom within a state of total nature, the only reason that humans consented to give up some freedom to rulers and governments is for them to protect their natural rights. People only have to comply with the government so long as they preserve their rights, if too many rights were taken away then that would defeat the point of joining society and people have the right to overthrow the government. In today's world there are many places that violate your rights and freedom, in these places there is no religious toleration and people have to live their life in a way that is harmful to their psychology, individuality and beliefs. By removing too many rights, people lose a lot of their freedom to act ethically. If a person were threatened upon death to not help someone in need, this would remove their freedom to act ethically, for some people this is their reality. In different places, rulers suppress

freedom differently, for better or for worse. In the modern day, rights and freedom are somewhat suppressed in a way that violates our right to help others either through propaganda, social media, manipulation, economic means, threats or violence.

To put it briefly, there is no ethics without freedom, as an agent without will or life cannot follow the criteria of ethics, also ethics is subjective to humans, so something that isn't human is not at fault for acting unethically. I also discussed the role of the government in ensuring we have our rights and how they suppress it. Although we may have some freedom to act ethically, ultimately it is suppressed in ways that are beyond our control. However, what if we had no control over ourselves?

For the majority of our existence, our physical traits seemed to be chosen at random or by God. We could be born ugly or beautiful, tall or short, rich or poor, master or slave. Although we had no control over this, what we did have control over was our mind, our actions, our personality and our behavior, outside of our physical configuration we were the master of our own universe. Since these times many discoveries have been made, such as the majority of our personality is a product of our environment. This makes sense but outside of this we still have control over ourselves... right?

When people discovered genetics and science, some humans bent it to conform with their own corrupted ideals, this was very prevalent in the 1800s to early 1900s. One of these people was Adolf Hitler, he would consume these theories which were untrue yet pretended to have a scientific basis, and he used these ideas to create a tyranny that had the people which he saw as genetically subhuman at the bottom. Hitler is one example of many that used pseudoscience to justify their evil behavior. With the field of human biology expanding faster than ever, many

people became excited with the potential of all this new information, and out of this came the Human Genome Project.

The HGP (Human Genome Project) Started in 1990. The HGP's main goal was to determine the base pairs of human DNA and mapping and sequencing all the genes that makeup the human genome. It was completed in 2003. One of things that was found out through the research of this project was that we don't really have control over who we become, almost no control. DNA is the basic building block of every organism that exists and has ever existed. DNA looks like a ladder that is twisted into a double helix. DNA contains 4 nitrogenous bases, A, T, C and G. A strand of DNA is called a Gene. There are countless combinations of genes and they each represent a feature that an organism has, they decide your physical traits as well as your personality. DNA is just like a line of computer code that our body executes to make us. Everything from my physical traits to how smart or dumb I am, how kind I am, what nutrients and sugars my body can process, how many eyes I have, if I have a penis or a vagina, it's all determined by the instructions in my cells, known as genes. Do genes predetermine everything?

What does this imply for ethics? Determinism is the belief that everything in the universe has already been determined, and it's impossible to act outside of that, that has already been destined. Naturalism is essentially the belief that everything in the universe is natural and can be measured by science. So if Naturalism is true which seems to have been the case forever, then that means that every living organism is scientifically deterministic. Every decision that one will ever make can be predicted accurately by analyzing their specific genome as well as their upbringing.

What if one gene can show that an individual is violent, this is known as the warrior gene, MAOA. Studies show that people who carry a low activity variant of the MAOA gene are more

predisposed to violence and aggression, this gene can influence the brain under the right conditions and can make someone act a certain way.

“When viewing angry and fearful faces in an fMRI, the MAOA-L group had significantly increased activity in their amygdala, and reduced activity in their ventromedial prefrontal cortex.” (Dixon)

This evidence has already been used in court and some people's sentences have been reduced. This could entail that everything could be predicted by genes. This means that free will is just an illusion and people can be punished ahead of time for what they will do in the future because their genes have it written out. People no longer have to decide their path because their genes can decide it for them and they can be placed in society according to what their genes show us.

Is this really true? Will everything now change because our genes predetermine everything? Well unfortunately no. Our genes are not as simple as that. Like stated before, our genes are instructions on how your body should be built and what traits an organism has. A gene can't control you, just as a speech by someone can't control you. It is true that the low activity variants of MAOA make you more likely to commit a violent crime, but also 6 in 10 people carry the low activity variants of MAOA, and 6 in 10 people don't commit violent crimes, only people who had an abusive childhood and carry the low variant are more likely to be violent, and doesn't mean they will be violent. So free will is real and we humans are still responsible for our actions, which means that ethics still stands true.

We might not have as much free will as we thought before, but we still have enough to make ethical decisions. As it stands in the modern age, we have an understanding that our limited free will does exist, this might be true or not, but at least we can sleep in comfort, knowing that for now we have some control over our lives.

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