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THE IMPORTANCE OF FREE WILL

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Abstract:

One of the issues that people have with determinism is that they believe that it would encourage immoral behavior in human beings. This concern is due to the belief that there can be no morality, right or wrong without free will. If people were to find out that their behavior is not up to them, but that their actions are inevitable, would they continue to live their life unperturbed or would they use the deterministic worldview to excuse immoral behavior? In order to find answers to this question we conducted a research and analyzed similar researches. In our research, conducted in 2016, with participants being students at Rochester Institute of Technology Croatia – Zagreb we wanted to test if it were possible for people to change their views and their belief in free will after a short exposure to determinism. The short exposure was a 15-week “general education” course “Introduction to Philosophy”. In this course, two weeks were dedicated to the topic of free will. Our experiment consisted of 46 participants 18 to 24 studying either International Business or Information Technology. The topic of the research was Free Will vs Determinism and finding out through 18 questions what the views of the questioned responders are. Our questions were taken from the Free Will and Determinism scale from <http://breakingthefreewillillusion.com/fad-plus/>. The survey showed that a relatively little exposure to these topics can significantly influence people’s perspective. Additionally, participants who were exposed to the topics are more inclined to believe in determinism and participants who were not exposed are not even aware of the terms “determinism” or “free will”. Furthermore, similar researches discussed in the paper also prove the argument that people do act differently after being exposed to and adopting deterministic views. An individual can change his or her behavior and opinion. The change in opinion of an individual is seen in our experiment.

1. Introduction

One of the issues that people have with determinism is that they believe that it would encourage immoral behavior in human beings. This concern is due to the belief that there can be no morality, right or wrong without free will. If people were to find out that their behavior is not up to them, but that their actions are inevitable, would they continue to live their life unperturbed or would they use the deterministic worldview to excuse immoral behavior? Our experiment on the students of Rochester Institute of Technology Croatia, shows how even a short exposure of the deterministic view can

influence people's views and behavior. Furthermore, similar researches discussed in the paper also prove this argument.

Our experimental approach involves data gathered by a questionnaire to explain an aspect in the philosophical debate of free will. In some debates, like the debate about natural selection, examining people's intuitions is of a lesser value. However, philosophers do investigate free will and moral responsibility by the appeal to the intuitions of people. Likewise, both incompatibilists and compatibilists appeal to the intuitions of people. For example, for the development of objections to incompatibilist principles and adequate conditions for free will and moral behavior, compatibilists rely on the appeal to intuitions. Therefore, it makes sense to use people's intuitions in experimental philosophy in the search for the truth about free will and moral responsibility. The use of people's intuitions can provide a deeper understanding of free will and moral responsibility than relying only on the traditional 'armchair' analysis (Sommers, 2010).

2. Our research

In our research, conducted in 2016, with participants being students at Rochester Institute of Technology Croatia – Zagreb we wanted to test if it was possible for people to change their views and their belief in free will after having short exposure to determinism. The short exposure was a 15-week "general education" course the "Introduction to Philosophy". In this course, two weeks were dedicated to the topic of free will. The analyzed texts were: *Can a Traditional Libertarian or Incompatibilist Free Will Be Reconciled with Modern Science? Steps Toward a Positive Answer* chapter 17 by Robert Kane, Benjamin Libet's research *Do We Have Free Will, The Libet Experiment and Its Implications for Conscious Will* by Peter G.H. Clarke and the first two chapters from Robert Kane's book *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will*. It is important to emphasize that the professor did not suggest either of the positions; neither free will nor determinism was suggested as the only true one. He gave us a deeper understanding of both angles on this debatable question giving a lot of discussion on this topic of free will. Our experimental group consisted of 23 participants who did have the Introduction to Philosophy course at RIT in Zagreb and the other 23 participants were the control group who did not have the Introduction to Philosophy course. The participants were aged 18 to 24 studying either International Business or Information Technology. The topic of the research was Free Will vs Determinism with the aim of finding out through 18 questions what the views of the questioned responders are. Our questions were taken from the Free Will and Determinism scale from <http://breakingthefreewillillusion.com/fad-plus/>. This scale is useful in assessing people's beliefs in free will and determinism. The scale is used in numerous researches, including the research discussed above by Vons and Schooler. The words free will and determinism are not in the questions since we were aware of

the fact that our control groups have probably not been acquainted with these terms. Therefore, our questions were structured in a way that we obtain their views without using those words.

3. Results

Of the 18 questions given to the participants, we are showing the results of the three questions where the difference between the two groups is the most visible.

3. Chance events seem to be the major cause of human history (23 responses)

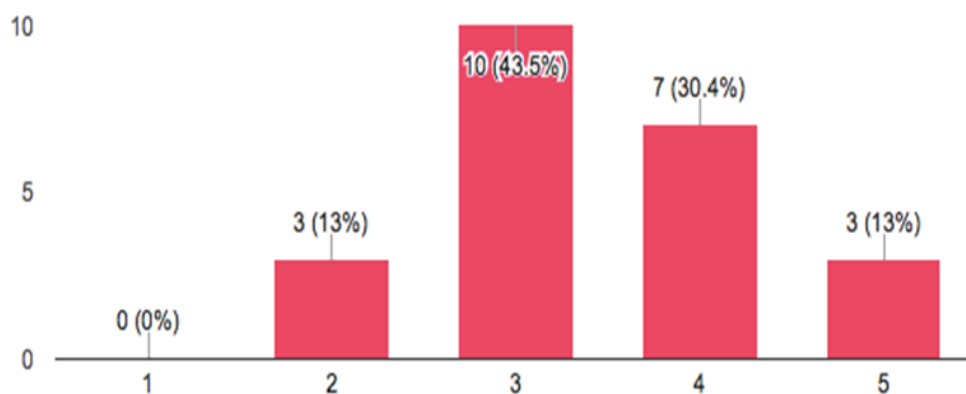


Table 1. Question from the survey – participants who did not have Introduction to Philosophy course

3. Chance events seem to be the major cause of human history (23 responses)

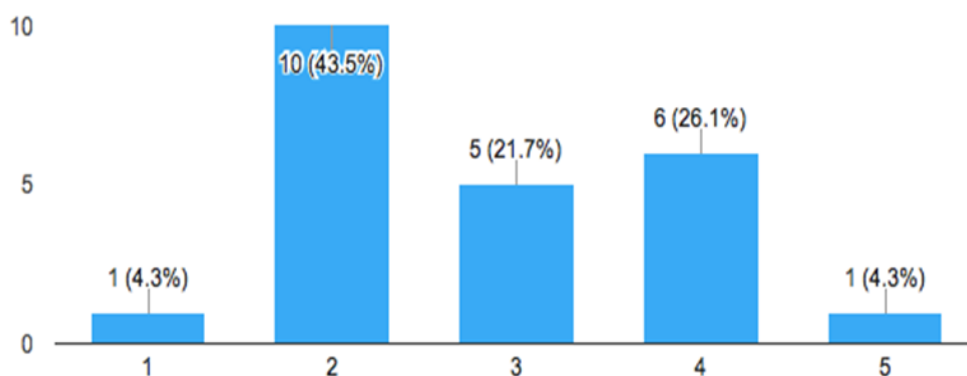


Table 2. Question from the survey – participants who did have Introduction to Philosophy course

In the third question, 43.4% of the participants who did not have Introduction to

Philosophy course claimed that they agree or completely agree that chance events are the main reason for all the events in the history while the other 43.5% were neutral showing that the control group either has the free will opinion or is neutral and unsure what to respond. On the contrary, 47.8% of the participants who were exposed to the topic of free will at the college, were against the possibility of chance being the main reason for human history.

17. Life is hard to predict because it is almost totally random. (23 responses)

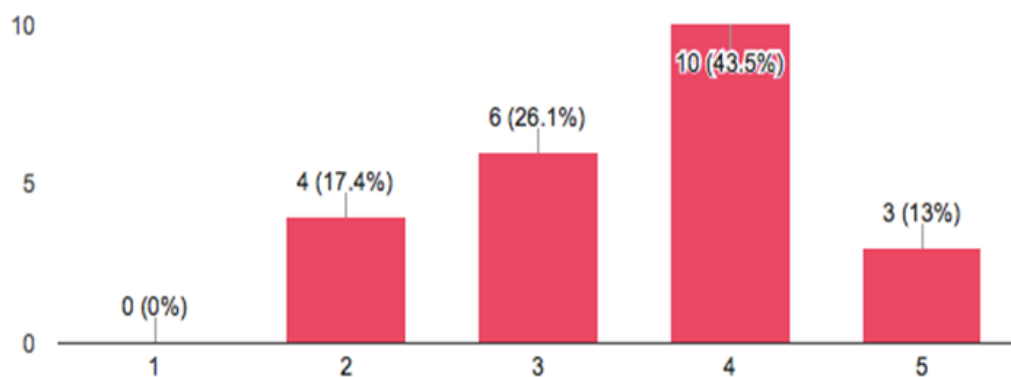


Table 3. Question from the survey – participants who did not have Introduction to Philosophy course

17. Life is hard to predict because it is almost totally random. (23 responses)

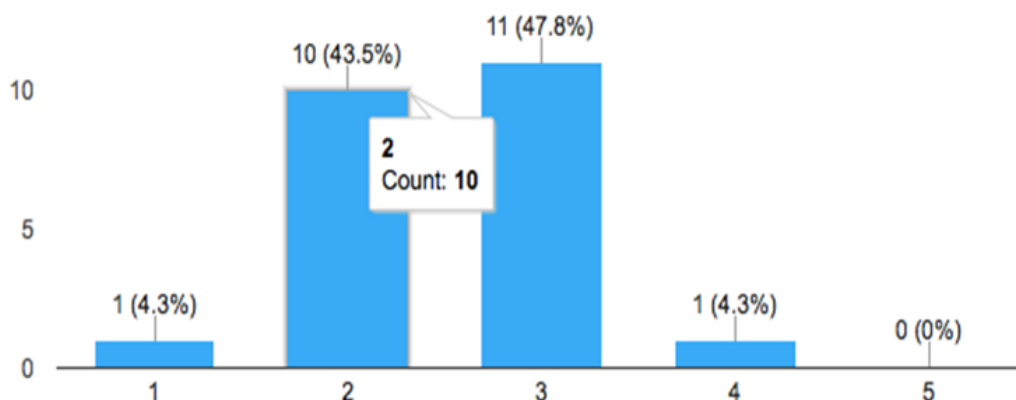


Table 4. Question from survey – participants who did have Introduction to Philosophy course

In Table 3. and Table 4., there is again a contrast between the two groups. More than 50% of the participants who did not have Introduction to Philosophy course stated that they think life is happening randomly, and that there is no way to predict it. On the other hand, students who had the Introduction to Philosophy course were more against the idea that life is happening totally randomly. Moreover, only 4.3% of the participants

(only 1 out of 23 participants) claim to agree with the statement in the seventeenth question.

18. People have the ability to choose between different possible courses of action.

(23 responses)

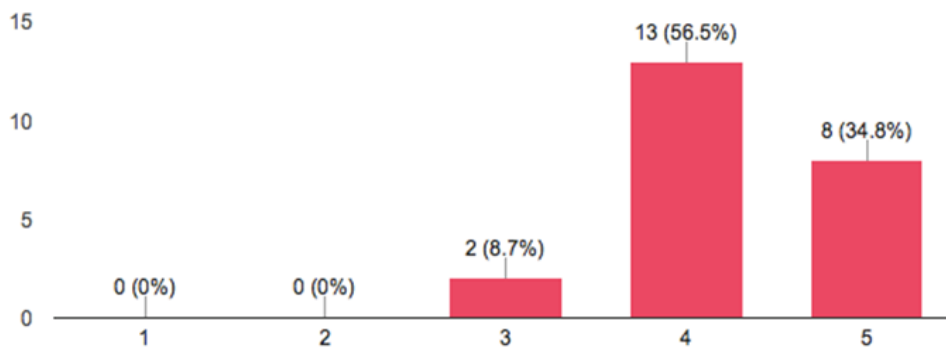


Table 5. Question from the survey – participants who did not have Introduction to Philosophy course

18. People have the ability to choose between different possible courses of action.

(23 responses)

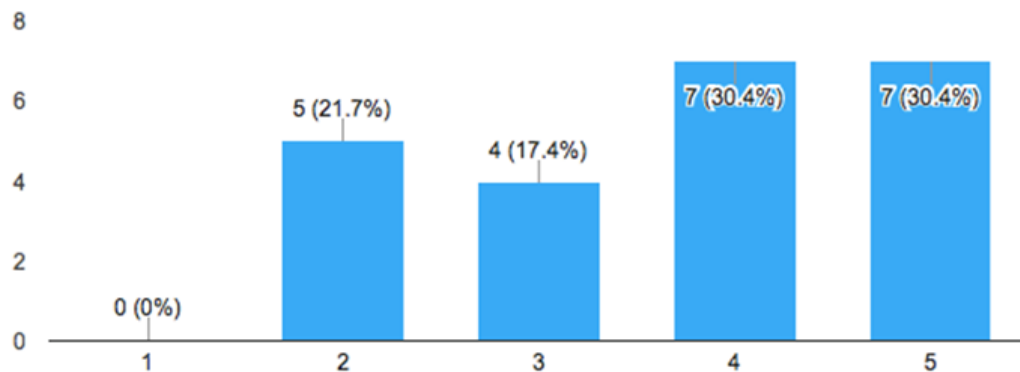


Table 6. Question from the survey – participants who did have Introduction to Philosophy course

4. Similar Research

- a. James Andow and Florian Cova - *Why compatibilist intuitions are not mistaken*

Similar to our research, in 2015 authors James Andow and Florian Cova wrote two studies on this topic. The first study was made on 89 participants; 55 being men. They received two scenarios, Feltz and Millan's Extreme Book and Fries, given in random order. In the Extreme Book, the protagonist John is living in a fatalistic universe. In

the other scenario, Fries, describes the protagonist Bill living in a deterministic universe. After the participants read both scenarios, they had to rate seven statements. Participants had to rate those statements which shows do they or do they not believe in free will. The results showed that the participants “attribute free will and moral responsibility to agents in fatalistic universes do so mostly because they perceive these cases as implying bypassing” (Andow & Cova, 2015).

The second study was conducted in the United States on 86 participants. Out of those 86 participants, 51 of them were male, 34 female, and 1 with no response on their gender (Andow & Cova, 2015). All of them received the story about the Magic Book. The Book was claimed to be the one that knows everything that an individual will do in the future. Moreover, an individual will act in a way that is written in the Magic Book, regardless of his or her thinking that the situation or act will end differently. “Even if a person does not want to act this way, then she will be forced to act against her will by the book’s magical powers” (Andow & Cova, 2015).

After reading this story about the Magic Book, the participants were asked to evaluate the same seven statements given in the first study. In the second study, only 14% of the participants maintained their statement that the agent can live with free will in this type of environment and be morally responsible. The results showed that while people do have some intentions of believing in free will no matter what, there is not many participants completely believing in free will. These studies were not enough to support the Feltz and Millan error theory which claims that the participants who claim to be compatibilists are not genuine compatibilists.

The research by James Andow and Florian Cova is similar to our research because it shows that being exposed to terms such as “determinism” and “free will” can influence and change people’s perception. Yet, in this examination and in our study, some people did not change their opinion even though they were exposed to the views. In our study, there are still some participants that kept their belief towards free will, even after they had the Introduction to Philosophy course.

b. Susan Wolf - The Importance of Free Will

Susan Wolf in her article *The Importance of Free Will* looks at the relationship between determinism and morality. Holding the soft determinist or compatibilist view, she argues in her paper that there is no need for the explanation of our actions and behavior to rest on the assumption that we have free will and if there is no free will we should not end our actions or change our behavior. Susan Wolf defines a part of the population as pessimists who hold the view that determinism and indeterminism are both incompatible with free will and that the absence of free will would be a bad thing. She says that when they are asked to explain why the lack of free will would be a bad thing the explanations are obscure but they all mention the practices of punishing and rewarding people for their actions as being irrational and inappropriate if determinism is true. However, she provides an argument that praising or blaming an individual should be done “only if by doing so we shall improve the moral quality of actions in the

future” or “only if by doing so we shall be obeying rules the institution of which will improve the moral quality of actions in the future”. (Wolf, 2008) Since the moral quality of actions is improved with institutions that are used for punishment and with institutions that are used for reward these practices of punishment and reward are justified no matter if determinism is true or not.

c. Meghan Griffith - Free Will: The Basics

The same as the book by Susan Wolf, the book titled *Free Will: The Basics* by Meghan Griffith, deals with the reoccurring questions raised about free will. The contents of the book do not offer any specific answers, much like philosophy itself, rather it pinpoints certain important issues and provides numerous examples from which an individual may conclude something on their own. Firstly, if we actually do not have free will it interferes with our moral responsibility. Nowadays most people agree that with moral responsibility comes a certain degree of individuals’ free will. Each person likes being subject to some kind of idolization and no person likes to be yelled at. Continuing with this, it can be said that each person needs to be a part of the “praise and blame” behavior in order for society to run as smoothly as possible. This is an idealistic viewpoint of behavior / free will. Yet, if determinism is true and valid, then our moral responsibility is questionable. The author gave a perfect example of an interference of determinism with the praise and blame behavior. If a person X makes a mistake, it is expected from another person Y to blame and point out the mistake that has been made. Yet, if determinism exists, why would person Y even feel to need to do that? Taking into consideration that determinism is like a prediction of individuals’ actions in the future, the blaming from person Y is in vain. This is a complicated situation that again leads us to the question: “do we even have free will?” In this example, Meghan Griffith claims that if determinism is valid, then maybe that praise and blame behavior is still a good approach for society. If determinists are right, that the future behavior of the person X is already determined, but “being blamed by others could be the determined path to it” (Griffith, 2013).

d. Kathleen D. Vohs and Jonathan W. Schooler - The Value of Believing in Free Will

A massive survey conducted in thirty-six countries showed that more than seventy percent of people believe that their fate is in their own hands. The scientific community believes that behavior is the cause of environmental features, genetic makeup, and brain mechanisms while numerous philosophers hold determinist views (Vohs & Schooler, 2008). A psychological experiment by Kathleen D. Vohs and Jonathan W. Schooler researches *The Value of Believing in Free Will*. They were aware of the fact “that changing people’s sense of responsibility can change their behavior” (Vohs & Schooler, 2008). Furthermore, they are witnessing how the views of scientists are spreading to nonscientists through newspaper articles and books. This made them

question what might happen if people start believing that their behavior is unavoidable and without their own choice. “Would people carry on, selves and behavior unperturbed, [...], might the adoption of a deterministic worldview serve as an excuse for untoward behaviors?” (Vohs & Schooler, 2008). Consequently, Vohs and Schooler conducted an experiment in which they manipulated the beliefs of participants regarding free will and then measured the influence of their beliefs on morality, by checking if they will cheat or not. They hypothesized that there would be more cheating done by participants who were persuaded into believing that our behavior is controlled by predetermined forces than by the participants who were not persuaded that our behavior is predetermined. In the experiment, there were thirty participants consisting of thirteen females and seventeen males. The participants were randomly separated into two groups. Both groups read from the same book by Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, but they read different passages. One group read a passage that claimed that free will is an illusion and the control group’s passage did not deal with the topic of free will. To test if the passages affected the participants’ beliefs, they had to complete two scales, the Free Will and Determinism scale and the Negative Affectivity Schedule. Then the participants were given an arithmetic test with 20 problems to solve on a computer. The experimenters told them that there is a programming glitch on the computer that displays the solution to the problem on the screen. Still, they were told if they press the space bar when the problem appears, the solution will not show up. They also told them that they will not be able to tell if they pressed the space bar but to still solve the problems honestly. However, the computer could tell how many times the space bar was pressed. The results of the experiment showed that participants that read the determinist passage stated weaker free will beliefs than the control group while their mood stayed the same. Furthermore, the results showed that there is a negative correlation “such that weaker endorsement of the notion that personal behavior is determined by one’s own will was associated with more instances of cheating” (Vohs & Schooler, 2008). Therefore, their hypothesis was correct and cheating increased in the group where participants were convinced that free will is an illusion. Vohs and Schooler stress how such a short exposure to deterministic views increased cheating and in that way immorality. The participants stopped viewing themselves as responsible for their actions and therefore cheating increased. Vohs and Schooler see this increase in the probability of unethical actions as a cause for concern and fear what if “denying free will simply provides the ultimate excuse to behave as one likes” (2008). This experiment is similar to our research since it shows what effects the exposure of deterministic views has on people.

5. Conclusion

It is important to mention that did not have a hypothesis but just handed out the surveys to students and waited for the results. The survey showed that relatively little exposure to these topics can significantly influence people’s perspective. Additionally,

participants who were exposed to the topics are more inclined to believe in determinism. Moreover, people are not even aware of the terms “determinism” or “free will”, nor do they know what the terms mean. Giving the questions from table 5 to our participants, we concluded that they did not differentiate free will from randomness. Almost every participant in the control group agreed that life is hard to predict because is almost completely random, having 91.3% of the participants agreeing or strongly agreeing, and only 8.7% of the participants unsure. Students who did listen to the free will and determinism topics showed a more skeptic way of thinking, giving the result of 21.7% of the participants disagreeing with the statement about people having free will and 17.4% of the participants were neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

We interpret this in the following way: people who believe in free will accept the factor of random happening, even though the concept of free will does not support the claim that events are happening randomly. Contrary, free will clearly states that the events that are happening in one’s life are under their control. We believe that this connection between randomness and free will happened because our participants, and people in general, do not understand the deeper meaning of what does the word random even means. Moreover, from our research, we also conclude that people who accept the deterministic perspective find determinism to be an excuse for the immoral things and events in their lives.

It can be concluded that people generally strive towards and are more inclined to the acceptance of free will. As shown in the experiment by Kathleen D. Vohs and Jonathan W. Schooler, people do act differently after being exposed to and adopting deterministic views. An individual can change his or her behavior and opinion. The change in opinion of an individual is seen in our experiment. Even though participants were students who are educated people, the Introduction to Philosophy course has made a noticeable influenced on them, causing them to be more skeptical and think more critically. Moreover, as Megan Griffith also points out regarding the importance of believing in free will: if holding a more deterministic view, one can feel useless and without any ambition in life. Therefore, people should generally be more educated on this topic to make them think more deeply into their pre-educated convictions. Besides, people with a deeper understating of the free will problem do not fail to realize that holding the deterministic perspective is not an excuse to act immorally.

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