

Can Education Be Deterministic?

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Abstract:

In this paper I argue that in thinking about education and free will we need to distinguish between two kinds of laws that govern any educational phenomenon: laws of nature and laws of culture. The first could be deterministic and hence the question of compatibility of free will and such laws arises. The second is probabilistic and hence the worry about the compatibility of free will and such laws does not arise. Moreover, I argue that thinking about education in the first sense, education could be reduced to physics and neuroscience. For educators, education is understood in the second meaning and hence education could limit free will but never make it impossible. In this realm the situation of either free will or education cannot exist. I conclude with educational implications.

Keywords: Free will – Education – Moral Responsibility- Educational Autonomy – Determinism

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هل يمكن أن تكون التربية حتمية؟

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جامعة الملك سعود

كلية التربية - قسم السياسات التربوية

المخلص:

أجادل في هذه الورقة أنه عند التفكير في التربية والإرادة الحرة، نحتاج إلى التمييز بين نوعين من القوانين التي تحكم أي ظاهرة تربوية: قوانين الطبيعة وقوانين الثقافة. الأول يمكن أن يكون حتمياً ومن هنا تبرز مسألة توافق الإرادة الحرة مع مثل هذه القوانين. والثاني احتمالي، ومن هنا لا ينشأ القلق بشأن توافق الإرادة الحرة مع مثل هذه القوانين. علاوة على ذلك، أرى أن التفكير في التربية بالمعنى الأول، يمكن اختزاله في الفيزياء وعلم الأعصاب. بالنسبة للمعلمين، تُفهم التربية بالمعنى الثاني، وبالتالي يمكن للتعليم أن يحد من الإرادة الحرة ولكنه لا يجعلها مستحيلة أبداً. في هذا المجال لا يمكن أن يكون الخيار بين الإرادة الحرة أو التربية. أختتم الدراسة بعدد من التطبيقات التربوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: حرية الإرادة - التربية - المسؤولية الأخلاقية - الاستقلال التربوي - الحتمية.

Introduction:

The discussion over “free will” is as old as the human experience. Who has control over what is going on in the world? Do we I as an individual have a significant kind of control over my actions? This question about this kind of control raises further metaphysical, ontological, and ethical questions such as: does that control require freedom to do otherwise or the power of self-determination? Does that control mean that our world is not deterministic? And is this control necessary for moral responsibility and human dignity? (O’Connor and Franklin, 2022). In modern philosophical discussions we have three main responses to the question of free will especially to the question if we have free will or not. First, we have the libertarians who hold that we have free will. They argue that “True sourcehood—the kind of sourcehood that can actually ground an agent’s freedom and responsibility—requires, so it is argued, that one’s action not be causally determined by factors beyond one’s control” and they “agree that exercises of free will require agents to be reasons-responsive” (O’Connor and Franklin, 2022). On the other hand, we have the determinists who hold that humans do not have free will since we live in a deterministic world and humans are not an exception.

Determinism is a highly general claim about the universe: very roughly, that everything that happens, including everything you choose and do, is determined by facts about the past together with the laws. Determinism isn’t part of common sense, and it is not easy to take seriously the thought that it might, for all we know, be true. The incompatibilist believes that if determinism turned out to be true, our belief that we have free will would be false. (Vihvelin, 2022)

The third position is hold by the compatibilists who argue that we could have free will even if the universe is deterministic.

Compatibilism offers a solution to *the free will problem*, which concerns a disputed incompatibility between free will and determinism. *Compatibilism* is the thesis that free will is compatible with determinism. Because free will is typically taken to be a necessary condition of moral responsibility, compatibilism is sometimes expressed

as a thesis about the compatibility between moral responsibility and determinism. (McKenna and D. Justin 2024).

This philosophical debate is essential not only in terms of metaphysical reasons but also for practical ones since it is deeply related to issues such as human relationships, moral responsibilities and justice. For example, legal institutions base their entire legitimacy on the idea that humans have free will and hence legally responsible. New development of Neuroscience raise deep questions about the law and the premise of free will. In their 2004 paper “For the Law, Neuroscience Changes Nothing and Everything”, Joshua Green and Jonathan Cohen argue that despite the fact the existing legal doctrine can accommodate whatever neuroscience will tell us, neuroscience will probably have a transformative effect on the law. That is, neuroscience will transform people’s intuitions about free will and responsibility. And since Green and Cohen hold that the existing legal principles make no assumptions about the neural bases of criminal behavior, that transformation can be accommodated within the existing legal framework.

Thus, recent developments in neurosciences and psychology related to the question of free will make it an educational question too. One area where qualitative development is the area of Artificial Intelligence and free will. AI is becoming an essential partner in education and one main issue related to our discussion is: can AI have free will? And what does that mean in education if the answer is yes. Scholars debated these issues from different perspectives such as moral responsibility (Campolo & Crawford, 2020), and the possibility of machines having free will (Krenc, K. 2022). In what follows, I focus the discussion on free will and education.

Research problem and research questions:

The general question of the reality of free will has its consequences on educational debates too. What is the relationship between education and free will? Can we educate without the assumptions that students have free will and have the autonomy to make decisions? Does that metaphysical debate around free will have real effects on daily practices such as schooling? Isn’t that common sense assumption that we have

free will and hence make decisions enough for educational practices and judgments? Scholars differ. For example, Dahlbeck (2017) argues that education can do without the free will premise. He provides a Spinozist defense of the educational promotion of students' autonomy. He argues for a deterministic position where freedom of will is deemed unrealistic in the metaphysical sense, but important in the sense that it is an undeniable psychological fact. He concludes by outlining a Spinozistic understanding of education for autonomy where autonomy is grounded in the student's acceptance and understanding of the necessary constraints of natural causation rather than processes of self-causation. And in his book *Education and Free will: Spinoza, Causal determinism and Moral Formation* (2019) where he assesses education and free will and makes use of Spinoza's insights on human freedom to construe an account of education that is compatible with causal determinism without sacrificing the educational goal of increasing students' autonomy and self-determination. Dahlbeck discusses Spinoza's view of self-determination and presents his own suggestions for an education for autonomy from a causal determinist point of view. On the other hand, other scholars hold views where free will is essential in the practice of education. For example, Weissman (2020) argues that:

Human agency for Aristotle, Peirce, and Dewey is the activity of people having a degree of control over their actions and effects in the public world. A rolling stone affects things in its path, while having no control of itself. A gymnast does both: he maintains his balance by controlling the rings from which he hangs. Social control is often construed as the expression of an authority's power over its people; but it is also, more hopefully, the collaborative power of a society's members as they organize to achieve its aims. (p. 32).

Thus, the issue of free will and education needs more investigations to understand the link between the discussion of free will in general and free will in education. Does the discussion differ when we move the discussion from the neuroscience to the social experiences such as education? To participate in this conversation I engage with one of the claims on these issues provided by Johannes Giesinger "Free Will and Education" (2010).

Research method:

The researcher used the philosophical analysis approach, which implements analyzing arguments and concepts and linking them to their theoretical and practical implications. This approach relies on highlighting arguments by clarifying their logical premises and the results that are deduced from those premises. The philosophical analysis approach also depends on studying the internal logic of arguments, which links the premises to the results. This approach seeks to clarify ideas and arguments and reach new results with theoretical and practical implications.

Free will and education:

In his paper “Free Will and Education” (2010) Johannes Giesinger argues that the current debate on the compatibility of free will and determinism inspires a dilemma in education. That is, the following two assumptions, although both necessary for education, seem incompatible. First, it is assumed that to educate means to control or guide a person’s acting and development. Second, it is also assumed that the addressees must be seen as being endowed with free will. Giesinger argues that the previous assumptions might lead to the following dilemma: “if the learner is free in her will, she cannot be educated; however, if she is successfully educated, then it is doubtful whether she can be seen as free” (p. 515). This dilemma arises according to certain takes on the problem of free and determinism. Giesinger names two of them: first is the strong conception of freedom—namely, the idea that to be free means being the causal source of one’s action and, second, is the weak conception of freedom—namely, the idea that freedom is the ability to act otherwise.

The first claim might be called the Agent-Causal Thesis, which could be stated like this “a free decision (or some event internal to such a decision) must be caused by the agent, and it must not be the case that either what the agent causes or the agent’s causing the event is causally determined by prior events” (Clarke and Capes, 2014). This is an incompatibilist claim; that is, it denies that free will and determinism are compatible. The second take on the problem of determinism and free will

that causes the dilemma is another incompatible thesis, however it could be compatible, that argues that acting freely means the agent has control over different alternative courses of action. However, it holds that if determinism is true, then there is only one course of action available. The solution Giesinger provides is what might be called the Reason-Explanation that holds that “to be free means being able to act on reason” (p. 515). In this paper I discuss what it means to move the dialogue on free will from the laws of nature to education then the two takes on the issue of free will and education as presented in Giesinger’s paper to show that no dilemma could arise.

Determinism and Education

The debate on free will and determinism is mostly a response to determinism. Determinism is “the thesis that the laws of nature, together with the state of the universe at any time, entail the state of the universe at all later time” (Vihvelin, p. 1). Or, in any other world with the same laws of nature and the same beginning as our world’s that world would be the same as ours. The threat to free will in this picture comes from the fact that human beings face something beyond their control—namely, the laws of nature and within these laws everything is determined. The relationship between humans and the laws of nature is a necessary relationship where there no chance of the laws of nature failing to operate or generate its consequences. Even if we take the weaker claim that laws are contingent and might have been otherwise, we end up with this picture under the current laws of nature “no one- and no thing- has the ability (or capacity, capability, power, disposition) to do or cause anything (perform any action, make any choice, think any thought, etc) that is a nomologically impossible event or sequence of events” (Vihvelin, p. 219). This is the picture in terms of thinking of free will and determinism but what about the picture in terms of thinking of free will and education?

Education is a social interaction but not entirely. That is, in an educational relationship or basically in a communication there are two different sets of laws that control such interaction. First, natural laws that govern our ability to sense, think, and communicate. That is, the laws of physics. These laws govern how our brains operate, how our senses

work, and how we reach each other. For example, it is impossible under such laws to go faster than light, to think without a functioning brain, and to challenge the law of gravity. These kinds of laws raise the metaphysical question about the possibility of free will—namely, is free will possible? The second level of laws is the artificial laws or cultural laws—namely the rules by which each group of people governs its social interactions. For example, educational policies in practice, the ways different generations treat each other, and the set of beliefs teachers and principals imply in schooling. The second level is contingent and historical. That is, it changes over time and it is open to more changes in the future. Moreover, these laws differ from person to person. Individuals react to such laws differently. These kinds of laws raise no metaphysical concern about free will. That is, these laws are obviously compatible with free will. They might fail to operate or generate their consequences. Thus, in reasoning about education and free will we need to take these two laws in consideration. Thinking about education and free will in terms of the first kind of laws (natural laws) requires no additional concern to education added to the current discussion on free will and determinism. That is, in that level we deal with basic facts related to the nature of the world prior to any educational activities. In other words in this level the debate should focus on the laws of nature and free will. However, thinking of education in terms of the second level—namely its cultural laws require additional concern for the following reasons. First, cultural laws are not deterministic. That is, they fail in many occasions to operate to generate their consequences. Teachers know that there is no guarantee that the efforts they make will cause particular results. Teachers and parents fail in many cases to cause what they intend to cause. In this sense it seems that the dilemma Giesinger presents does not follow. That is, educational relationships are always weak to threaten free will as ability or as capacity. They might limit our free will but never completely make it impossible. With educational relationships there is always a chance of unexpected consequences. Thus, there is no metaphysical conflict between education and free will. My argument might be spelled out as follows:

1. An educational relationship is governed by two kinds of laws: laws of nature and laws of culture.
2. The laws of nature are necessary and can't fail.
3. The laws of culture are probabilistic and might fail.
4. Therefore, dilemmas based on the "either or" situation (either education or free will) results only from thinking about education as a natural event governed by the laws of nature.
5. If 4 is true, then education as a natural event could be reduced to mere physical or chemical events.
6. If 4, then education as a social event raises no metaphysical conflict with free will.
7. If 6, no dilemma arises between education and free will.

Education and free will (Source Libertarian):

Now, I turn to the concepts of free will that Giesinger argues that they lead to dilemmas between education and free will. Giesinger raises this challenge to Source Libertarians:

First, they have to explain how the ability to initiate an act can arise within the individual. The second difficulty... in claiming the free actions can be radically ours, in the sense that they are ultimately caused by us, the source libertarian view raises the question of how these actions can be ours in a different sense—namely, who can they be related to our personal history, our identity, our reasons? (p. 520).

Let us examine these challenges based on the distinction stated above—namely, between education as natural phenomenon and education as a cultural phenomenon. I argue that the challenge results only from the first account. That is, for the first challenge education as cultural with its weak laws allows individuals to be influenced by education and at the same time initiate an act freely. The influence is weak to the degree that cannot determine one's actions. Moreover, the second challenge works only if we think of the natural laws that governs education. That is, actions that result in relation with necessary laws are hard to be understood as ours. To wit, since the power relation makes it not up to us to choose whether to act or not. On the other hand, in terms of education as understood as a cultural phenomenon which seems Giesinger has in mind here when writing "during the long process of

learning”, source libertarians face no challenge. That is, since the laws that govern our relations with those who educated us are not necessary laws, then we have the ability to be influenced by education and at the same time call these actions that we perform according to that education as ours. After all, we chose these actions to be ours. We were in a situation to choose since we were not under necessary conditions. We are the source of these actions since we choose to perform them. In other words the source of action is not that I learn about it from somebody else. Rather, the source is my decision to conduct that action. We call these actions ours since they were not imposed upon us by an extrinsic source. On the other hand, getting hungry is not my action since it is imposed by the laws of nature. Giesinger recognizes that this understanding helps us avoid the dilemma; however, he thinks it is incompatible with source libertarianism and I do not see why. Giesinger discusses Kant as a representative of source libertarianism whose take on free will and education leads to dilemmas. However, Kant sees no incompatibility between free will and education. He holds that Man has free will and that “Man is the only being who needs education. For by education, we must understand nurture (the tending and feeding of the child), discipline (Zucht), and teaching, together with culture” (p. 1). All these aims (education) are compatible with the laws of nature. By education, discipline in particular, “men are placed in the subjection to the laws of mankind” (Kant, p. 3). In another place Kant writes “Man can only become man by education” (p. 6). The noumenal self for Kant is outside the realm of the laws of nature and hence beyond the scope of education. Giesinger seems to worry about the compatibility of free will and educating the noumenal self but that, for Kant, education aims only at influencing the phenomenon self. For Kant the conflict between free will and restraint in education is practical not metaphysical. [In other words, he does not think that we are in either or situation. Kant writes

One of the greatest problems of education is how to unite submission to the necessary *restraint* with the child’s capability of exercising his *freewill*- for restraint is necessary. How am I to develop the sense of freedom in spite the restraint? I am to accustom my pupil to

endure a restraint of his freedom, and at the same time I am to guide him to use his freedom aright” (p. 27).

To sum, I argue that Kant means by education the cultural phenomenon and hence sees no incompatibility between education and free will.

Education and free will (to do otherwise).

Giesinger argues that the weaker concept of free will (to do otherwise) leads to a similar dilemma. The dilemma is stated as follows “if the learner possesses the ability to do other than that which is intended by the educator, then he cannot be educationally determined. If, however, he is educationally determined, he cannot be ascribed the ability to do otherwise” (p. 521). This argument supposes two claims: education is deterministic and determinism is incompatible with the ability to do otherwise. Or, this dilemma arises from adopting what Kardi Vihvelin calls the Basic Argument:

1. If determinism is true, then we are never able to do otherwise.
2. If we are never able to do otherwise, we have no free will.
3. Therefore, if determinism is true, we have no free will.

Regarding education we need to add another premise that education is deterministic. The full argument then is:

1. If determinism is true, then we are never able to do otherwise.
2. If we are never able to do otherwise, we have no free will.
3. Therefore, if determinism is true, we have no free will.
4. Education is deterministic.
5. Therefore, education is incompatible with free will.

According to the distinction I illustrated above between the laws of nature and laws of culture that govern education, education can be deterministic only if understood as an activity governed by the laws of nature. However, education as schooling or human communication cannot be deterministic. Cultural laws, although able to limit our free action, they cannot diminish it. These laws are probabilistic. Even those who practice indoctrination know that they might fail. Education in this sense requires the *hope* that things could go the way we want them to go. So, I think the fourth claim is mistaken and hence the dilemma does not arise. My argument could be presented as follows:

1. If determinism is true, then we are never able to do otherwise.
2. If education is deterministic then conceptions of free will as the ability to do otherwise leads to a dilemma related to the incompatibility between education and free will). (Giesinger's premise).
3. Education is not deterministic. (my premise).
4. Then, the account of free will as the ability to do otherwise does not lead to the dilemma that education and free will are incompatible.

One might raise another challenge by denying 1. A compatibilist might argue that determinism is compatible with the ability to do otherwise (Vihvelin, 2013). I do not think I need to do that in order to dispute the claim that education (understood as human communication) and free will could be incompatible.

Educational implications:

Emphasizing the cultural nature of education has essential results. First, it shows that what is educational about education is that which cannot be deterministic. Biesta (2015) calls this the beautiful weakness of education. Educational relationships are existential and weak, and that exactly what make them educational. He argues that education is to take the risk and engage in these kinds of relationships where the results cannot be determined. Second, the results of this paper give us a critical framework by which we can analyze current approaches to develop education. New approaches to educational development start from the market model paradigm (Baltodano, M. 2023) where the emphasis is on making education a process where the outcomes are guaranteed by the inputs and the processes. The results of this paper should help educators and policymakers realize the consequences of thinking about education within the market model. In particular, the results point out the risk of limiting students and teachers' freedom and turning education to a process of reproducing predetermined students.

Philosophers of education can benefit from this paper on two levels. First, in analyzing educational theories to assess their assumptions about human nature and what the consequences of these assumptions are. Second, this paper can help philosophers of education analyze educational policies and their premises regarding freedom in education.

These analyses can lead to critical recommendations to those making the decisions.

Conclusion:

Johannes Giesinger argues that certain conceptions of free will and education lead to dilemmas. That is, free will as understood by source libertarians and “to do otherwise” incompatibilists is incompatible with education. Both conceptions, Giesinger argues, lead to the following dilemma “if the learner is free in her will, she cannot be educated; however, if she is successfully educated, then it is doubtful whether she can be seen as free” (p. 515). I argued that this dilemma does not arise for both conceptions for the following reason. Education is governed by two kinds of laws: laws of nature and laws of culture. If we consider the laws of nature, then the discussion should aim to the compatibility of free will and the laws of nature. The discussion then will be about basic facts about the physical nature of the world and the nature of human beings. However, if we consider education as it is most the time understood as human communication such as parent-child communication or schooling then we are thinking of a phenomenon that is governed by the laws of culture which are probabilistic. Within the scope of these laws education cannot be deterministic and hence cannot be incompatible with free will. The paper end up with educational implications both in philosophical and practical levels.

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