

Modifying the Christian View of Determinism

The purpose of science is to answer questions about our natural world. Why does this happen? What does this mean? Where does this theory apply? One of the biggest questions that science has yet to answer is that of free will...surrounding the doctrine of Determinism. Determinism is the doctrine that everything that has happened or will happen is already determined out of human power, out of human free will. As we learn more about this idea, more and more evidence comes up that suggests that determinism may be true. Much of the opposition to it comes from Christians, who see free will as a key aspect to their faith. When it comes down to it, however, a Christian scientist does not have to suspend disbelief about determinism in order to properly do his or her job, because determinism itself does not, in theory or in practice, prevent a person from being Christian.

Let us first examine determinism. As Bertrand Russell put it in his book Religion and Science, "Determinism as a general doctrine asserts that *complete* determination of the future by the past is always possible, theoretically, if we know enough about the past and casual laws." (p.147) The key word here is "theoretically." Earlier in this chapter, Russell also wrote that he did not believe that science as it currently stands could conclude whether or not determinism was true. Although there are many tests that suggest that there is no free will, there are also many tests that suggest there is free will, and, when it comes down to it, none of these tests are conclusive. In fact, the most solidified evidence for each side comes

from the same branch of science: physics (Russell, 145). As time wears on, more tests will occur, getting us closer to an answer. So what are the Christian scientists to do? Will some of them give up on their faith if and when this answer is discovered? Yes, but, upon closer inspection one must realize that determinism is more harmonious with Christianity than it is discordant.

Although there are different types of Christianity—from the extremely conservative and strict to the very casual—one must realize that from person to person...faith is different. Two people may be members of the same church, but have completely different concepts of faith and God. This, although it may seem inconsequential, is very important. Take two Christian scientists, one of whom falls in the conservative, to-the-Book category and the other who considers him/herself a Christian, but does not actively practice in his or her faith. If both were faced with evidence proving determinism to be true, the very conservative Christian may have trouble with it, but the casual Christian may accept it without a second thought. So, in that sense, a scientist may be able to be a Christian without having to suspend disbelief about the doctrine of determinism. However, I believe that the more conservative Christians may be able to accept determinism by looking at it through a different lens.

One of the most widely held beliefs in Christianity is that of fate. Although some do not believe in predestination, many people place their faith in God's plans for them. They believe that God already has everything planned out. As Jeremiah 29:11 states, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to

prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” So what does this mean? Interpreting this verse literally implies the fate that many Christians believe so strongly in. But with that fate already planned out...do we even have choices to make about our future, about the left fork or the right fork? Do we even have free will? Many people find an answer to this question by introspection. I mean this literally. Many believe the gut feelings that tell us when things seem like good or bad ideas are God’s way of telling us what he wishes for us to do. People often find that when they disobey these feelings, bad things happen and vice versa. This, however, does not offer much insight into the free will aspect to the Christian faith.

Free will is so crucial to Christianity because it directly correlates to the forgiveness aspect. When humans sin, they are doing things against God’s will, against how God intends for people to behave. Does God know necessarily when we will sin? There are many instances in the Bible when Jesus knows of the wrong a person will soon commit. For instance, Jesus “predicted” that Judas of Iscariot would betray him three times, and he hence did so. Did Judas then behave out of free will? Or were his actions predetermined and therefore out of his hands? A confusion surrounding the idea of free will thus emerges within the Christian faith. With this confusion in mind, it may be easier to see the semblance between Determinism and Christianity.

Once again, determinism is the doctrine that everything that has ever and will ever happen is caused by forces outside of human will. So, we have no actual

choices, because everything has already been determined for us. Doesn't that sound a lot like the Christian idea of fate? What if, instead of natural laws determining what will happen, God is determining what will happen? Those two concepts are not very far away from each other! Many Christians also believe that God manifests Himself in nature. The natural laws that govern our bodies, dictating our next moves, could very well be God's manifestation in nature. So what if, when humans follow their gut instincts...they are really just enacting the will of God, the will that He had already planned out for them. But what about the times when people disobey those gut feelings? Do those natural laws predict when that happens too? Why, then, one must ask, do we get the gut feelings? And what does it mean to the Christian scientist who asks him/herself these questions? There are many questions surrounding the idea of determinism that have yet to be answered. The Christian scientist in search for this answer need not hold a specific belief, because he or she could view the natural laws discovered as one and the same with God. Christians in general need not reject this doctrine simply because of its scientific nature; instead, they should step back and accept the similarities.