

# Perspectives of Genetic Determinism Through Differing Lenses of Philosophical Theodicies

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The human genome project, along with other advances in modern biology, has ushered in a plethora of scientific and philosophical considerations. Many humanitarian concepts and debates have been revived and incorporated in order to allow us to explore the implications of new biological knowledge. Genetic determinism is one of these concepts. It has jarring implications for modern theology and our view of humanity in general that should be investigated thoroughly, even allowing the doctrine of genetic determinism its flaws. In correlation to the prevalent theodicies (justifications for the coexistence of evil and God) of our day, Augustinian and Irenaean, the possibility of genetic determinism has a considerable impact. It is important to note that the central point of this paper is not to claim the rightness or wrongness of considering religion and its merit on the basis of modern science. It is merely a brief experiment in filtering theodicy through principles that are scientifically and philosophically related. The question we must ask throughout this endeavor is: does Augustinian or Irenaean theodicy justify the reality of evil with the existence of god given that genetics can be a deterministic force?

Genetic determinism is distinct from philosophical determinism. Genetic determinism claims that human action and behavior are the result of genetics and genetics alone. Philosophical determinism is the doctrine that for any event  $e$ , there is a sufficient causal condition for  $e$ . Hence philosophical determinism can encompass genetics as a sufficient causal condition, but genetic determinism does not look outside of genetics for sufficient causal conditions. Genetic determinism is stalwartly reasoned to be false because it does not take into account environmental factors in shaping behavior – it seems to only utilize nature as a means to human action and to completely ignore nurture. Most scientists who disparage genetic determinism are nevertheless themselves determinists because their reasoning for disparaging genetic determinism

is that it does not take into account environmental deterministic factors. Refutations of genetic determinism in favor of acknowledging nurture are flawed in rejecting philosophical determinism – nurture itself may be acceptable as a sufficient causal condition. Despite widespread disapproval, there is some degree of truth to genetic determinism. After all, genes are often sufficient causes for some things. Our genes determine specific propensities - human beings have no control over this. Every person is born with different capacities, weaknesses, and strengths due to their unique genome sequence, completely independent of the human will. This slight admittance of determinism is all that is necessary to have a significant impact on the two major western theodicies of our era: Augustinian and Irenaean.

Theodicy is better known as the problem of evil. The purpose of any theodicy is to justify how evil can coexist with a perfectly good, perfectly knowing, and perfectly powerful god. The problem of evil is an obstacle for theism because it asserts that it isn't rational to believe in the Judeo-Christian concept of god because the amount of evil – pain and suffering – that exists in the world disproves that such a god exists. The problem of evil asserts that if such a god did exist, then that god would lessen or do away with the amount of evil in this world. Since evil remains prevalent, this god must not exist because the qualities attributed to this god logically require God to be intolerant of the human condition of pain and suffering.

Augustinian theodicy attempts to rectify this problem by claiming that evil can be accounted for due to human free will. This displaces the blame for evil from god and places it squarely on the shoulders of human beings. God, the theodicy reasons, endowed human beings with free will. This means that people can do good and evil, moral and immoral acts, completely freely. All evil – pain and suffering - is the result of the misuse of free will. Genetic determinism certainly poses some risk to

the Augustinian solution for evil. It forces one to admit that there are definite forces that cannot be controlled by free will embedded in our biology that at least play a role in determining human behavior. If all evil that exists is the result of free will, and our genes inhibit (in any way) free will, then those who subscribe to this theodicy must re-evaluate their stance on evil actions to exclude those that have any roots in the human genome. The alternative is to claim that actions that are even only partially the result of free will can account for evil. This amounts to the claim that inhibited free will is the cause of evil; even though these actions were not completely freely chosen they are still the fault of human beings' free willism. This is not a very attractive option since it ascribes full responsibility to individuals despite an unconscious and unchosen force behind action.

Irenaean theodicy attempts to reconcile the problem of evil in a different manner. Its thesis is that evil exists because human beings are undergoing evolution in this world and are thus not yet perfect beings that can only do good. Its primary difference from Augustinian theodicy is the moral status of humanity upon the advent of creation. According to Irenaean theodicy, God created earth in order to allow human beings to evolve through time with the aim of *becoming* God's children. John Hick, contemporary philosopher and advocate of Irenaean theodicy, explains: "If God's purpose was to create finite persons embodying the most valuable kind of moral goodness, he would have to create them, not as already perfect beings but rather as imperfect creatures who can then attain to the more valuable kind of goodness through their own free choices as in the course of their personal and social history new responses prompt new insights, opening up new moral possibilities, and providing a milieu in which the most valuable kind of moral nature can be developed" (Hick 95). Genetic determinism seems to fare better under the reigns of this theodicy than the last. Perhaps the genome is so structured by god in order to most effectively bring about the height of spiritual or moral evolution in human beings. And yet Irenaean theodicy also centers on the development of free will as crucial to this evolution. This is revealed when Hick writes, "Within such a situation there is the possibility of

human beings coming freely to love and know their Maker. Indeed, if the end-state which God is seeking to bring about is one in which finite persons have come in their own freedom to know and love him, this requires creating them initially in a state which is not that of their already knowing and loving him. For it is logically impossible to create beings already in a state of having come into that state by their own free choices" (Hick 93). Complete free will is absolutely requisite in order to love and accept God. Genetic determinism then negates the possibility of freely loving God. Recent postulations about the existence of a "god gene," VMAT2, could further obliterate this position. If genes even in part generate religious belief, then true religiosity is never acquired. However, the crux of this theodicy - that free will exists through natural evolutionary processes erected *by* God - fits nicely with the idea that if a god gene does exist, it could be viewed as a testament to God's ingenious design (Day). The genome as a deterministic factor could just be a part of the divinely inspired process, a cog in the children-of-God-making machine. The mechanistic process of determinism is not refuted. It is merely given a divine purpose. But this still sharply contradicts the Irenaean doctrine that love of God and indeed the goal of evolution is contingent on free will. Because of this inconsistency a genetically determined propensity for religious belief especially lessens the strength of this theodicy.

One could perhaps reconcile genetic determinism with theodicy by claiming that it is actually necessary for operational free will. This is to say that it puts us in the situations necessary to allow us to exercise free will, to overcome our biology, given that free will demands freely choosing against one's desires and impulses. Since many of these are presumably caused by our biological structure and origin, this could conceivably be utilized as an argument that our genome or biology is essential for free will to exist in the first place. It provides us with something to exercise our free will *against*. This is strengthened by the fact that the opposite of determinism, indeterminism, does not automatically grant the existence of free will. An event that lacks causal conditions subjects itself to random arbitrariness. This has led some to conclude that deterministic

factors are actually necessary in order for free will to exist. Regardless of the strengths or weaknesses in this reasoning and its implications, it does not salvage Augustinian or Irenaean theodicy. They are both still subjected to the unsettling notion that coerced actions (“free” actions that stem from deterministic processes) are the *justification* for evil in the world.

In Matt Ridley’s *Genome*, it is asserted that human free will affects the genome. If this were indeed true, genetics would lose its sway as a deterministic force and therefore its relation to either theodicy. In a chapter entitled *Pre-History*, Ridley relates how human beings acquired milk-drinking abilities and uses it as evidence against genetic determinism. “The evidence suggests that such people took up a pastoral way of life first, and developed milk-digesting ability later in response to it. It was not the case that they took up a pastoral way of life because they found themselves genetically equipped for it. This...provides an example of cultural change leading to an evolutionary, biological change. The genes can be induced to change by voluntary, free-willed, conscious action” (Ridley 194). It is unsound to call this an example of free will determining the genome. The assertion that ‘consciously becoming a dairy farmer’ is an example of free action because the action affected the genome and not vice versa is false. What Ridley is really saying is that because of a *change in environment* the genome adapted itself. If the dairy farmers became dairy farmers due to sufficient causal conditions, they did not act freely. They merely reacted in the only way that was actually possible. (Logical possibility is something entirely different because it relies on possible contingencies. What was actuated, however, could not have been any different because it relies on actual contingencies.) Ridley seems to assume, at least in *Genome*, that any action not performed exclusively as a result of our genes is a free action. This is incorrect. Action that is performed independently of the genome is indeed not a product of genetic determinism. But this does not mean that the action was the result of human free will or that genes are never (at least) part of a set of sufficient causal conditions.

The fact alone that genetics *can* be a crucial determinant force is a challenge to the attempt of

any theodicy to justify the amount of evil and/or human suffering in the world in light of an existent god. Although genetic determinism is not wholly accurate because it neglects other deterministic factors, it is nevertheless a hindrance to human free will and therefore undermines Augustinian and Irenaean theodicy. Augustinian theodicy cannot stand in a world full of human internal determinacies and indeterminacies because according to its doctrine evil is the result of free will, not will that is at least in part free. Irenaean theodicy fares better in incorporating genetic determinism, but ultimately suffers from the same shortcoming as Augustinian theodicy: the necessity of free will in order to excuse evil for God. The fact that our genome often can operate as a dictator of human traits, such as homosexuality or religiosity, negates the consistent free action human beings ought to possess in order for these theodicies to function. Furthermore, the fact that human actions can influence the genome itself does not imply in any way that these actions were ever free actions at all.

## References

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