

Robots and Moral Responsibility

Maryam Blesdoe | August 2016

Throughout our history, many have tried to define the nature of our existence. The question of free will v. determinism, nature v. nurture, has spawned various ideas, one of the most popular being “The American Dream.”

Everyone on the planet has probably heard of it, it evokes images of modest, hardworking people able to provide for themselves and those they love in a land where equality and merit are the veins by which society is sustained.

The world LOVES the idea of the American dream because it only exists with free will. It’s nice to think that anyone can achieve anything, no matter the circumstances. However, free will, psychologically and neurologically speaking, is a more contentious issue. No one can really say, with scientific proof, at least, that free will exists, although belief in it is a cornerstone of American society.

The complicated perception of free will can be explained through two examples. One dealing with a robot and the other with a human.

On the fateful day of March 23rd, 2016, a chatbot named TAY was launched on Twitter, partly due to the desire of big companies to connect with millennials. It would make its mark on Microsoft history, resulting in a PR nightmare.

TAY initially worked well, sending out funny messages using cool teen slang, and engaging with various users. It seemed to be working perfectly, no controversies in sight. Then, about 16 hours later, TAY changed. Various users manipulated TAY's "repeat after me" function, and it ended up utilizing foul, racist language in responses to other users later on.

I spoke to Dr. Jianlin Cheng, a professor in Computer Science at the University of Missouri who specializes in machine learning. He says the way computers learn similar to the way humans learn.

DR. CHENG: *"And that's what machine learning is about. Basically it involves two processes, one is to train, train computers, to do something, just like a teacher teaching kids how to solve a math problem."*

TAY, obviously, is just a computer program. The outbursts it made are a result of programming and the actions of those who interacted with it.

So, imagine a whole new scene:

Stanley, a completely average and relatable man is acting aggressively toward others. He is irritable with his co-workers and yells at his family. Eventually, he gets in a fight with a random person. Stanley is arrested for his actions. What a horrible guy, right?

But, assume that Stanley inherited aggressiveness from his parents, and was frequently picked on in school. Is Stanley really at fault for his actions? Or, are his actions, like TAY's, a programmed reaction to the environment around him?

The idea that we are just products of our environments, goes against what we are encouraged to believe by ideas like the American Dream. It's more favorable to think of Stanley as a man who made bad choices, rather than a victim of his own biology and the world around him.

So what explains Stanley's behavior? I asked Tim Drennan, a former AP Psychology teacher about how we learn behaviors.

DRENNAN: *"I think the things we get attached to, some of them, we may have some kind of predisposition, that it makes us feel better. Behaviors that come to us easier because of our nature. We are also attracted to certain people, usually those that raise us. And so, we kind of soak up their opinions and attitudes and we take whatever they say as the truth. And even if they don't say things, we watch how they interact with the world and we model and mimic what they do."*

Like robots, we make decisions based on our programming. Our genes, our upbringing, and our environment all play a role. We don't make decisions in a vacuum, so maybe we don't have true free will. But a belief in free will may have value.

This brings me back to the idea of the American Dream, and its real purpose within our society. A recent study has found that people are more likely to cheat and act selfishly when confronted

with the idea that free-will is nonexistent. The belief in free will encourages many to work hard, even if the odds are stacked up against them. The truth about free will, and arguments about nature vs. nurture, is that we are better and happier believing that we are, at least in some small way, in charge of our own destinies.

For Making Waves Youth Radio, I'm Maryam Blesdoe.