

Napoleon, Determinism, and The Great Man Theory

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I have been reading the biography on Napoleon by Andrew Roberts for the past couple of weeks and I have thoroughly enjoyed it. It is an incredibly long and detailed account on Napoleon's life and I really didn't realize how little I knew about the man prior to reading this bio. Roberts is most definitely an apologist for many of Napoleon's actions and I have been trying to keep that in mind as I read the bio but even with that perspective, it has been very difficult for me to dismiss the greatness of Napoleon. The man made many terrible mistakes and ruled as an absolute dictator over France but I think his rise to power is an insane story and nothing has happened quite like it in Europe. Recently, many comparisons have been made of Napoleon's life to Hitler but I think that Hitler and Napoleon both lived in very different times and have very different objectives. In my view, I see Napoleon as a man who grew up in the French Revolution, believed in the ideals that the French fought for and then watched as his country slowly began to consume itself which compelled him to take power and try to save his nation. Napoleon existed in a time where there were no constitutional republics (America came into existence along with his dynasty) and all the heads of state around him claimed that they should be the rulers of their kingdoms because God had ordained it. Hitler rose in response to Europe beginning to become dominated by constitutional republics and his fascist movement largely was aimed at shutting down democracy and enlightenment ideals of egalitarianism and freedom of expression. While Napoleon established himself as the dictator of France, he continued to spread egalitarianism, science and republicanism throughout Europe as he fought off the other heads of state who continued to declare war on him BECAUSE he was doing this. I think reducing Napoleon's reign down to "well he was a dictator so he is just like Hitler" is completely insane given that at the time the rest of the heads of state in Europe (and the rest of the world) were all essentially dictators of their respective nations. I mean Jefferson was the sitting president during most of Napoleon's reign and the man literally owned slaves and is largely used as a punching bag to criticize America's foundation as being authoritarian as well.

Learning more about him has made me consider shifting my position on the Great Man Theory. As a scientist, I have a tendency to believe in a very deterministic world. I think the world follows cause and effect and it is hard for me to believe that one person could have the capability to influence the world in the ways that Napoleon did. I used to think that this meant that the world was entirely predetermined but as I have gotten older, I often come at odds with this belief. I don't really know if I have free will or not. I think that it is in my best interest to believe that I do have free will and I am responsible for my actions. This has led me to find much success in my own life and in reconciling past mistakes and planning for the future. I no longer take a backseat in my life believing that I am not in control. I think that the newer theories of physics also largely dismiss the idea that the world is deterministic. The world most certainly is unpredictable and there is no way we can accurately model any of it with certainty. It is also a core pillar of science to know that everything we currently have is just a guess. An educated

guess, but still a guess. Quantum mechanics is the best example of this. We literally must give in to the fact that the world at its smallest level can only be described in mere probabilities and nothing else. We cannot be certain about any measurement, which I think can translate to us never being able to be certain about our future as well. This might not mean that there is free will or that the world is nondeterministic. We just might not have the math to describe the world accurately enough yet but it seems that so far the trend is in the opposite direction of determinism, at least that's how I interpret it. I think the idea of a much more subjective universe is also apparent at the opposite end of physics in math models of the larger and fastest objects in the universe. Einstein's relativity theories tell us that the laws of physics are entirely relative to the reference frame of the observer and almost all of his work has now been proven to be true. Your speed and your location matter in how the space and time in your reference frame are determined. These equations allow us to still create models that show the dynamics of what an observer would experience in one's respective reference frame and even though it is still modelable, I think it highlights that even in the way the universe operates it matters on the individual's (or even individual particle's) own experiences in time and space. This question of free will and determinism is largely an unscientific question and is not falsifiable unless one was able to somehow turn back the clock of time and rerun the universe to see if the outcomes would be the same. I think it is still a very interesting idea to consider but I have lately been trying to avoid being bogged down by questions like these. As I stated, I think it is in our best interests as individuals to believe in free will and I think that is all that is important. Napoleon most certainly believed in his own free will and his abilities to change the face of Europe and he without a doubt did exactly that.

In *War and Peace*, the synopsis of much of what Tolstoy is trying to show is that the expulsion of the French from Russia wasn't because of the actions of a few great men, such as the Tsar or the leader of the military, Kutuzov. Russia prevailed against the French because of all of the Russians coming together to fight a war of attrition and fighting to the bitter end, even after the French burned Moscow. I don't think the Russians were continuing to fight because of the inspiring words of the Tsar or Kutuzov. They were individuals fighting to survive against a French onslaught. Tolstoy also really drives in the point that he doesn't think that 300,000 Frenchmen (over 600,000 men including men from the rest of Europe, plus the supply train) could've all been compelled to march deep into Russia solely off of the orders of one man. Each of these men were making their own conscious decisions and he argues that it is impossible for all of them to essentially be brainwashed by a single leader into fighting the Russians in their homeland. He compares this idea to calculus, arguing that invasion of Russia should be analyzed by considering all of the infinitesimal decisions that were made by each Frenchman that led them into foreign lands. I think that this is a really strong argument against this idea of great men being the movers that keep history moving forward. It has stuck with me ever since I read the book but I think that this bio in some ways comes at odds with much of what Tolstoy argues. When Napoleon took over his first command of the Army of Italy, his men didn't have shoes. They were completely demoralized and they had been beaten back to the border of Italy by the

Austrians occupying the region. Napoleon was infamous for his obsessive micromanagement and many of the letters he would write throughout the day were over the tiniest details of the provisions of his army (many of these letters were about shoes). Napoleon immediately began attempts at inspiring the morale of the men and training them to follow very strict tactics and formation changes. He instantly reorganized the army and began making radically different appointments over who was in charge of the logistics of the operation. I think that it is definitely true that each of the Frenchmen in the Army of Italy at some moment had to make up their minds over whether or not they were going to follow the orders of their new young commander but the orders wouldn't have been there if Napoleon never existed. To me, it is glaringly obvious that without Napoleon, the French would've never gotten the Austrians out of Italy and this is what triggered his rise to emperor and the eventual domination of France throughout the European mainland. It's hard for me to believe that anyone else could've fulfilled Napoleon's shoes. I think that these situations were in some ways a combination of the ideas of Tolstoy and the men writing history before him. Napoleon relied on the free conscious decisions of every man underneath his command but they also relied on Napoleon to force these decisions to be made. Reducing history down to the actions of a few individuals seems silly but so does discounting the actions of those great individuals. This also isn't a scientific question so I imagine I will continue to go in circles on this for years to come (most likely I will hold the opinion of the author of whatever book I have just read lol). As with free will, I think that it is in my self interest at the moment to believe that the actions of a few great individuals can have a large difference in the world, mainly because I would like to make changes and have positive influences on the world around me and the best way of doing that is becoming one of these great actors (might be feeding my delusions of grandeur but I would rather be doing that than sitting around doing nothing believing I am incapable of ever making a difference on anything).

I don't know. Napoleon was definitely a flawed man and made many mistakes but I think that he was a major driving force in spreading the Enlightenment across Europe. I think that he was an embodiment of much of what the Enlightenment represented, including its contradictions of promoting freedom and egalitarianism while also finding ways of justifying evil things like racism and authoritarianism. I don't think many of these ideas wouldn't have been spread throughout Europe without him. I also think that he had deep respect for the scientific method and was actively trying to improve the world, at least up until the point of him having a power trip after a string of victories early in his reign as emperor. It might even be too soon to say what Napoleon's influence on the world was. It is still a relatively recent time since his reign. Arguably, the dominance of America in this past 30 year era of peace might erase much of his influence on Europe and the rest of the world based on the success of American ideas of decentralization, a major emphasis of individual rights and the functionality of an actual constitutional republic.