

1.2 Free Will: Ancient Dispute, New Themes

ROBERT KANE

Robert Kane teaches philosophy at the University of Texas.

I
“There is a disputation that will continue till mankind are raised from the dead, between the necessitarians and the partisans of free will.” These are the words of twelfth-century Persian poet, Jalalu’d-din Rumi. The problem of free will and necessity (or determinism), of which Rumi speaks, has puzzled the greatest minds for centuries—including famous philosophers, literary figures, theologians, scientists, legal theorists, and psychologists—as well as many ordinary people. It has affected and been affected by both religion and science.

In his classic poem, *Paradise Lost*, John Milton describes the angels debating how some of them could have sinned of their own free wills given that God had made them intelligent and happy.¹ Why would they have done it? And why were they responsible for it rather than God, since God had made them the way they were and had complete foreknowledge of what they would do? While puzzling over such questions, even the angels, Milton tells us, were “in Endless Mazes lost” (not a comforting thought for us

humans). On the scientific front, issues about free will lead us to ask about the nature of the physical universe and our place in it (are we determined by physical laws and movements of the atoms?), about human psychology and the springs of action (can our actions be predicted by those who know our psychology?), about social conditioning, moral responsibility, crime and punishment, right and wrong, good and evil, and much more.

To dive into these questions, the best way to begin is with the idea of *freedom* itself. Nothing could be more important than freedom to the modern world. All over the globe, the trend (often against resistance) is toward societies that are more free. But why do we want freedom? The simple, and not totally adequate, answer is that to be more free is to have the capacity and opportunity to satisfy more of our desires. In a free society we can walk into a store and buy almost anything we want. We can choose what movies to see, what music to listen to, whom to vote for.

But these are what you might call *surface* freedoms. What is meant by *free will* runs deeper than these everyday freedoms. To see how,

Copyright Robert Kane © 2001. This essay was commissioned especially for the eleventh edition of this anthology.

suppose we had maximal freedom to make such choices to satisfy our desires and yet the choices we actually made were manipulated by others, by the powers-that-be. In such a world we would have a great deal of everyday freedom to do whatever we wanted, yet our free *will* would be severely limited. We would be free to *act* or choose *as* we will, but would not have the ultimate say about what it is that we will. Someone else would be pulling the strings, not by coercing us against our wishes, but by manipulating us into having the wishes they wanted us to have.

You may be thinking that, to some extent, we do live in such a world, where we are free to make numerous choices, but are manipulated into making many of our choices by advertising, television, public relations, spin doctors, salespersons, marketers, and sometimes even by friends, parents, relatives, rivals, or enemies. One indication of how important free will is to us is that people generally feel revulsion at such manipulation. When people find out that what they thought were their own wishes were actually manipulated by others who wanted them to choose in just the way they did, they feel demeaned. Such situations are demeaning because we realize we were not our own persons; and having free will is about being your own person.

The problem is brought out in a striking way by twentieth-century utopian novels, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*.² In the fictional societies described in these famous works, people can have and do what they will or choose, but only to the extent that they have been conditioned by behavioral engineers or neuro-chemists to will or choose what they can have and do. In *Brave New World*, the lower-echelon workers are under the influence of powerful drugs so that they do not dream of things they cannot have. They are quite content to play miniature golf all weekend. They can do what they want, though their wants are meager and controlled by drugs.

The citizens of Skinner's *Walden Two* have a richer existence than the workers of *Brave New World*. Yet their desires and purposes are also covertly controlled, in this case by behavioral en-

gineers. Walden Two-ers live collectively in a kind of rural commune; and because they share duties of farming and raising children, they have plenty of leisure. They pursue arts, sciences, crafts, engage in musical performances, and enjoy what appears to be a pleasant existence. The fictional founder of Walden Two, a fellow named Frazier, forthrightly says that their pleasant existence is brought about by the fact that, in his community, persons can do whatever they want or choose because they have been behaviorally conditioned since childhood to want and choose only what they can have and do. In other words, they have maximal *surface freedom* of action and choice (they can choose or do anything they want), but they lack a *deeper freedom* of the will because their desires and purposes are created by their behavioral conditioners or controllers. Their wills are not of "their own" making. Indeed, what happens in Walden Two is that their surface freedom to act and choose as they will is maximized by minimizing the deeper freedom to have the ultimate say about what they will.

Thus Frazier can say that Walden Two "is the freest place on earth" (p. 297), because he has surface freedoms in mind. For there is no *coercion* in Walden Two and no *punishment* because no one has to be forced to do anything against his or her will. The citizens can have anything they want because they have been conditioned not to want anything they cannot have. As for the deeper freedom, or free will, it does not exist in Walden Two, as Frazier himself admits (p. 257). But this is no loss, according to Frazier. Echoing *Walden Two*'s author, B. F. Skinner (a foremost defender of behaviorism in psychology), Frazier thinks the deeper freedom of the will is an illusion in the first place. We do not have it anyway, inside or outside Walden Two. In our ordinary lives, he argues, we are just as much the products of upbringing and social conditioning as the citizens of Walden Two, though we may delude ourselves into thinking otherwise. The difference is that, unlike Walden Two, our everyday conditioning is often haphazard, incompetent, and harmful.

Why then, Skinner asks, reject the maximal surface freedom and happiness of Walden Two for a deeper freedom of the will that is something we do not and cannot have anyway? Along with many other scientists, he thinks the idea that we could be *ultimate* determiners of our own ends or purposes (which is what the deeper freedom of the will would require) is an impossible ideal that cannot fit into the modern scientific picture of the world. To have such freedom, we would have to have been the original creators of our own wills—causes of ourselves. But if we trace the psychological springs of action back further and further to childhood, we find that we were less free back then, not more, and more subject to conditioning. We thus delude ourselves into thinking that we have sacrificed some real (deeper) freedom for the happiness of Walden Two. Rather we have gained a maximum amount of the only kind of freedom we really can have (surface freedom), while giving up an illusion (free will).

Seductive as these arguments may be, there are many people (myself included) who continue to believe that something important is missing in Walden Two and that the deeper freedom is not a mere illusion. Such persons want to be the ultimate designers of their own lives as Frazier was for the lives of Walden Two. They want to be the creators, as he was, not the pawns—at least for their own lives. What they long for is what was traditionally meant by “free will.”

Here is yet another way of looking at it. Free will in this deeper sense is also intimately related to notions of moral responsibility, blameworthiness, and praiseworthiness. Suppose a young man is on trial for an assault and robbery in which his victim was beaten to death. Let us say we attend his trial on a daily basis. At first, our thoughts of the young man are filled with anger and resentment. But as we listen daily to how he came to have such a mean character and perverse motives—a sordid story of parental neglect, child abuse, sexual abuse, bad role models—some of our resentment against the young man is shifted over to the parents and others who abused and influenced him. We begin

to feel angry with them as well as him. Yet we aren’t quite ready to shift all of the blame away from the young man himself. We wonder whether some residual responsibility may not belong to him. Our questions become: To what extent is *he* responsible for becoming the sort of person he now is? Was it *all* a question of bad parenting, societal neglect, social conditioning, and the like, or did he have any role to play in it?

These are crucial questions about free will, and about what may be called *ultimate responsibility*. We know that parenting and society, genetic makeup and upbringing, have an influence on what we become and what we are. But were these influences entirely *determining* or did they “leave anything over” for us to be responsible for? That’s what we wanted to know about the young man. The question of whether he is merely a victim of his bad circumstances or has some residual responsibility for being what he is depends on whether these other factors were or were not *entirely* determining.³

Turning this around, if there were factors or circumstances that entirely determined what he did, then to be ultimately responsible, he would have had to be responsible to some degree for some of those factors by virtue of earlier acts through which he formed his present character. As the philosopher Aristotle put it centuries ago, if a man is responsible for the wicked acts that flow from his character, then he must at one time in the past have been responsible for forming the character from which these acts flow. But, of course, if *all* of our choices and actions were entirely determined by prior circumstances, we would have had to be responsible to some degree for some of these earlier circumstances by still earlier acts of ours, and so on indefinitely backward in time—an impossibility for finite creatures like ourselves. At some point, if we are to be ultimately responsible for being what we are, there must be acts in our life histories in which parenting and society, genetic make-up, and other factors did not completely determine how we acted, but left something over for us to be responsible for then and there. This is why many people have thought that the deeper

freedom of the will is not compatible with being completely determined by the past. Surface freedoms (to do or choose what we will) may be compatible with determinism, but free will does not seem to be (as Skinner himself realized).

II

Yet such thoughts only lead to a further problem that has haunted free will debates for centuries: If this deeper freedom of the will is not compatible with determinism, it does not seem to be compatible with *indeterminism* either. An event that is undetermined might occur or might not occur, given the entire past. (A determined event *must* occur, given the entire past.) Thus, whether or not an undetermined event actually occurs, given its past, is a matter of chance. But chance events occur spontaneously and are not under the control of anything, hence not under the control of agents. How then could they be free and responsible actions? If, for example, a choice occurred by virtue of a quantum jump or other undetermined event in your brain, it would seem a fluke or accident rather than a responsible choice. Undetermined events in the brain or body, it seems, would inhibit or interfere with freedom, occurring spontaneously and not under our control. They would turn out to be a nuisance—or perhaps a curse, like epilepsy—rather than an enhancement of our freedom.

Or look at the problem in another way that goes a little deeper. If my choice is really undetermined, that means I could have made a different choice *given exactly the same past* right up to the moment when I did choose. This is what indeterminism and the denial of determinism mean: exactly the same past, different outcomes. Imagine, for example, that I had been deliberating about where to spend my vacation, in Hawaii or Colorado, and after much thought and deliberation had decided I preferred Hawaii, and chose it. If the choice was undetermined, then exactly the same deliberation, the same thought processes, the same beliefs, desires, and other motives—not a sliver of difference—that led to

my favoring and choosing Hawaii over Colorado, might by chance have resulted in my choosing Colorado instead. That is very strange. If such a thing happened it would seem a fluke or accident, like that quantum jump in the brain just mentioned, not a rational choice. Because I had come to favor Hawaii and was about to choose it, when by chance I chose Colorado, I would wonder what went wrong in my brain and perhaps consult a neurologist.

For reasons such as these, people have argued that undetermined free choices would be “arbitrary,” “capricious,” “random,” “irrational,” “uncontrolled,” “inexplicable,” or merely “matters of luck or chance,” not really free and responsible choices at all. If free will is not compatible with determinism, it does not seem to be compatible with indeterminism either.

These charges are powerful ones and defenders of free will over the centuries have made extraordinary claims attempting to respond to them. Free will does require indeterminism, these defenders have said. But it cannot *merely* be indeterminism or chance. Some “extra factors” must be involved in free will that go beyond ordinary scientific or causal understanding. Immanuel Kant, for example, insisted that we can’t explain free will in scientific and psychological terms. To account for it we have to appeal to the agency of what he called a “noumenal self” outside space and time that could not be studied in scientific terms.⁴ Others have appealed to what Nobel physiologist John Eccles calls a “transempirical power center,” which would intervene in the brain, filling the causal gaps left by indeterminism or chance.⁵ Still others have appealed to a special kind of agent-causation—or, as Roderick Chisholm has called it, “immanent causation”—that cannot be explained in terms of the ordinary scientific modes of causation in terms of events or occurrences. Where all prior events, both physical and mental, leave a choice or action undetermined, the agent- or immanent cause determines it, but cannot be determined in turn because it is not an event. The agent-cause is, in Chisholm’s words, a “prime mover unmoved.”⁶

Such unusual strategems are common among defenders of an indeterminist free will (who often nowadays are called “incompatibilists” because they believe that free will is not compatible with determinism and “libertarians” because they believe in addition that free will is not an illusion). But these unusual strategems, such as noumenal selves, transempirical power centers, and agent- or immanent causes, have unfortunately reinforced the view, now widespread among philosophers and scientists, that traditional notions of free will requiring indeterminism are mysterious and have no place in the modern scientific picture of the world. Such libertarian strategems, to their critics, are reminiscent of the old debates about vital forces in the biology of the nineteenth century, where obscure forces were postulated to explain what otherwise could not be explained about living things. They remind us of the Arkansas farmer when he first saw an automobile. He listened intently to the explanation of how the internal combustion engine worked, and nodded in agreement, but insisted on looking under the hood anyway because, as he said, “there must be a horse in there somewhere.”

Thus, defenders of a nondeterminist free will are faced with a dilemma that was expressed by philosopher Thomas Hobbes at the beginning of the modern era. When trying to explain free will, these incompatibilist or libertarian defenders tend to fall either into “confusion” or “emptiness”—the confusion of identifying free will with indeterminism or the emptiness of mysterious accounts of agency in terms of noumenal selves, transempirical power centers, non-occurrent or agent-causes, or other strategems whose operations remain obscure and unexplained. What is needed to escape this dilemma is some new thinking about how free will can be reconciled with indeterminism and how it might fit into the modern scientific picture of the world, without appealing to extra factors that have made it seem so mysterious. In the remainder of this essay, I want to suggest some new ways of thinking about this problem and about

free will generally, which may stir you to do likewise.⁷