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Robert Kane

A CONTEMPORARY
INTRODUCTION TO

Free Will



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The Free Will Problem

1. Introduction

“There is a disputation that will continue till mankind is raised from the dead, between the necessitarians and the partisans of free will.”

These are the words of Jalalu'ddin Rumi, twelfth-century Persian poet and mystic. The problem of free will and necessity (or determinism), of which he speaks, is one of the most difficult and “perhaps the most voluminously debated of all philosophical problems,” according to a recent history of philosophy. Debates about free will have 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. Why would they have done it? And why were they responsible for their sins 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, according to Milton, 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?), and about social conditioning (Are we determined to be the kinds of persons we are by heredity and environment, birth and upbringing?).

In philosophy, debates about free will lead to issues about crime and punishment, blameworthiness and responsibility, coercion and control, mind and body, necessity and possibility, time and chance, right and wrong, and much more. In consequence, the free will problem is not fitted easily into one area of philosophy. It touches ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, theory of knowledge, philosophy of law, philosophy of science, and philosophy of religion.

To understand what this “problem of free will” is and why it has puzzled so many minds for centuries, the best way to begin is with two familiar notions we all understand—or think we understand—freedom and responsibility.

2. *Freedom*

Nothing could be more important than freedom to the modern age. All over the world, people clamor for freedom; and the trend (in spite of frequent violent resistance to it) 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 be able to satisfy more of our desires. In a free society, we can buy what we want and travel where we please. We can choose what movies to see, what books to read, whom to vote for.

But these freedoms are what you might call *surface* freedoms. What we mean by *free will* runs deeper than these ordinary freedoms. To see how, suppose we had maximal freedom to make choices of the kinds just noted to satisfy our desires, yet the choices we actually made were in fact 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 freedom of *will* would be severely limited. We would be free to *act* or to choose *what* we willed, but we would not have the ultimate power over what it is that we willed. Other persons would be pulling the strings, not by coercing or forcing us to do things against our wishes, but by manipulating us into having the wishes they wanted us to have.

Now it may occur to you that, to some extent, we do live in such a world, where we are free to make choices but may be manipulated into making many of them by advertising, television, spin doctors, salespersons, marketers, and sometimes even by friends, parents, relatives, rivals, or enemies. One sign of how important free will is to us is that people feel revulsion at such manipulation and feel demeaned by it when they find out it has been done to them. They realize that they may have thought they were their own persons because they were choosing in accord with their own desires and purposes, but all along their desires and purposes had

been manipulated by others who wanted them to choose exactly as they did. Such manipulation is demeaning because, when subjected to it, we realize we were not our own persons; and having free will is about being your own person.

The problem is nicely illustrated by twentieth-century utopian novels, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*. (You may be familiar with more recent films or science fiction works with similar themes.) In the futuristic societies described in these classic works, people can have and do what they will or choose, but only to the extent that they have been conditioned since birth by behavioral engineers or neurochemists to will or choose what they can have and do. In *Brave New World*, the lower-class workers are under the influence of powerful drugs, so that they do not think about things they cannot have. They are quite content to play miniature golf all weekend. They can do what they want, but their wants are limited and controlled by drugs.

The citizens in Skinner's *Walden Two* have it better than the workers in *Brave New World*. Yet the desires and purposes of those who live in Walden Two are also covertly controlled, in this case by behavioral engineers. Citizens of Walden Two live collectively in what can be described as a rural commune; and because they share duties of farming and raising children, they have plenty of leisure. They pursue arts, sciences, and crafts, engage in musical performances, and enjoy what appears to be a pleasant existence. Indeed, the leading figure of the novel, a fellow named Frazier, who founded Walden Two, 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.

Frazier then adds provocatively that, in his view, Walden Two "is the freest place on earth," since people there can choose and do anything they want. And in a sense he is right. There is no need for *coercion* in Walden Two or for *punishment* (there are no prisons). No one has to be forced to do anything against his or her will. No one harasses the citizens, and no one has to harass them. Yet we might wonder whether Walden Two *is* the freest place on earth. Is all this *surface* freedom in Walden Two not brought about at the expense of a *deeper* freedom of the will? The citizens of Walden Two can indeed do anything they want or will to do, but they do not have the ultimate say about what it is that they want or will. Their wills are determined by factors they do not control. Such an objection is in fact made by one of Frazier's critics in the novel, a philosopher named Castle who visits Walden Two.

But Frazier is untroubled by Castle's criticism. He admits that this supposedly deeper freedom of the will does not exist in Walden Two but

argues that it is no real loss. Echoing the novel's author, B. F. Skinner (who was a foremost defender of behaviorism in psychology), Frazier thinks this so-called freedom of the will—the freedom that Castle and other philosophers have trumpeted for centuries—is an illusion. We do not and cannot have such a freedom anyway, he says, inside *or* outside Walden Two. In our ordinary lives, 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. We may think we are the creators or originators of our own wills only because we are unaware of most of the genetic, psychological, and social factors that influence us. Moreover, the idea that we could be ultimate or “original” creators of our own wills—that we could somehow be “causes of ourselves”—is an impossible ideal, according to Frazier. If we trace the psychological springs of actions back to their origins—back to childhood, say—we find that we were less free then, not more.

Thus the gauntlet is thrown down by Frazier—echoing Skinner and many other modern thinkers: the so-called deeper freedom of the will is an illusion dreamt up by philosophers and theologians before we understood more about the hidden causes of behavior. It is an outdated idea that has no place in modern scientific picture of the world or of human beings. (Note that the philosopher who defends this “outdated” notion in Walden Two is given the medieval-sounding name “Castle.”) Why sacrifice the everyday freedoms that really matter to us—freedoms from coercion, punishment, constraint, oppression, and the like—for an illusory freedom of the will that we cannot have anyway?

3. *Responsibility*

Reflecting in this way on the idea of *freedom* is one path to the free will problem. Another path is accessed by reflecting on the notion of *responsibility*. Free will is also intimately related to notions of accountability, blameworthiness, and praiseworthiness for actions.

Suppose a young man is on trial for an assault and robbery in which the victim was beaten to death. Let us say we attend his trial and listen to the evidence in the courtroom. At first, our attitude toward the defendant is one of anger and resentment. What the young man did was horrible. But as we listen daily to how he came to have the mean character and perverse motives he did have—a sad story of parental neglect, child abuse, sexual abuse, and bad role models—some of our resentment against the defendant is shifted over to the parents and others who abused and mistreated him. We begin to feel angry with them as well as with him. (Note how

natural this reaction is.) Yet we aren't quite ready to shift all 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 his behavior *all* a question of bad parenting, societal neglect, social conditioning, and the like, or did he have any role to play in choosing it?

These are crucial questions about free will, and they are questions about what may be called the young man's 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 is what we want to know about the young man. The question of whether he is merely a victim of bad circumstances or has some residual responsibility for being what he is—the question, that is, of whether he became the person he is *of his own free will*—seems to depend on whether these other factors were or were not *entirely* determining.

4. *Determinism and Necessity*

The problem of free will arises in human history when, by reflections such as these, people are led to suspect that their actions might be determined or necessitated by factors unknown to them and beyond their control. This is why doctrines of *determinism* or *necessity* are so important in the history of debates about free will. Whenever determinist doctrines arise, their appearance signals that humans have reached a higher stage of self-consciousness in which they begin to wonder about the sources of their behavior and about their place as actors in the universe. Philosophy begins in *wonder*; said the ancient philosopher Aristotle, and no wondering affects our self-image more profoundly than this one about free will. We do not want to be pawns in some unknown chess game.

Doctrines of determinism have taken many historical forms. People have wondered at different times whether their choices and actions might be determined by fate or by God, by laws of physics or laws of logic, by heredity and environment, by unconscious motives or psychological or social conditioning, and so on. But there is a core idea running through all historical doctrines of determinism that reveals why they are a threat to free will—whether the doctrines be fatalistic, theological, logical, physical, psychological, or social. According to this core idea:

An event (such as a choice or action) is *determined* when there are conditions obtaining earlier (such as the decrees of fate or the foreordaining acts of God or antecedent causes plus laws of nature)

whose occurrence is a sufficient condition for the occurrence of the event. In other words, it *must* be the case that, *if* these earlier determining conditions obtain, then the determined event will occur.

In more familiar terms, we say that a determined event is *inevitable* or *necessary* (it cannot but occur), given the determining conditions. If fate decreed or God foreordained (or the laws of nature and antecedent causes determined) that John would choose at a certain time to go to Samarra, then John *will* choose at that time to go to Samarra. Determinism is thus a kind of necessity, but it is a conditional necessity. A determined event does not have to occur, no matter what else happens (it need not be *absolutely* necessary). But it must occur when the determining conditions have occurred. If the decrees of fate had been different or the past had been different in some way, John may have been determined to go to Damascus rather than to Samarra. Historical doctrines of determinism refer to different determining conditions. But all doctrines of determinism imply that every event, or at least every human choice and action, is determined by some determining conditions in this sense.

5. *Free Choices and Open Futures*

To see where the conflict lies between determinism and free will, consider again what free will requires. We believe we have free will when we view ourselves as agents capable of influencing the world in various ways. Open alternatives, or alternative possibilities, seem to lie before us. We reason and deliberate among them and choose. We feel (1) it is “up to us” what we choose and how we act; and this means we could have chosen or acted otherwise. As Aristotle noted: when acting is “up to us,” so is not acting. This “up-to-us-ness” also suggests that (2) the ultimate sources of our actions lie in us and not outside us in factors beyond our control.

If free will implies these conditions, one can see why determinism would be a threat to free will. If one or another form of determinism were true, it seems that it would *not* be (1) “up to us” what we chose from an array of alternative possibilities, since only one alternative would be possible. And it seems that the (2) sources or origins of our actions would not be “in us” but in something else (such as the decrees of fate, the fore-ordaining acts of God, or antecedent causes and laws of nature) outside us and beyond our control.

To illustrate these conflicts, suppose Molly has just graduated from law school and has a choice between joining a large law firm in Dallas or a smaller firm in Austin. If Molly believes her choice is a *free* choice (made

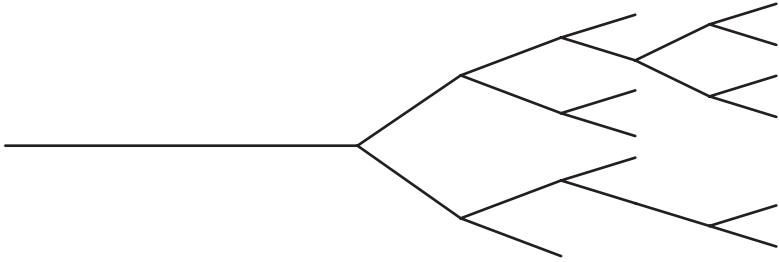


Figure 1.1 A Garden of Forking Paths

“of her own free will”), she must believe both options are “open” to her while she is deliberating. She could choose either one. (If she did not believe this, what would be the point of deliberating?) But that means she must believe there is more than one possible path into the future available to her and it is “up to her” which of these paths will be taken. Such a picture of an open future with forking paths—a “garden of forking paths,” we might call it—is essential to our understanding of free will. Such a picture of different possible paths into the future is also essential, we might even say, to what it means to be a person and to live a human life.

But determinism threatens this picture, for it seems to imply that there really is only one possible path into the future, not many. And yet, first impressions are an unreliable guide on a subject as contentious and difficult as free will. We shall see that many philosophers and scientists, especially in modern times, have argued that, despite appearances to the contrary, determinism poses no real threat to free will, or at least to any kind of freedom or free will “worth wanting” (as Daniel Dennett has put it). The open future or garden of forking paths depicted in figure 1.1 looks convincing, they say, but it hides a multitude of puzzles and confusions.

So the question of whether determinism is true (“the Determinist Question”) is not the only question that must concern us as we begin our inquiries into free will. We must also consider whether determinism really does conflict with free will. (This second question is often called “the Compatibility Question.”) Let us look at these two questions in turn.

6. The Determinist Question and Modern Science

Many people wonder why worries about determinism persist today, when universal determinism is no longer accepted even in the physical sciences, which were once the strongholds of determinism. In the eighteenth

century, a great physicist, the Marquis de Laplace, imagined that a super-intelligent being (often called Laplace's Demon), knowing all the physical facts about the universe at one moment and applying Newton's laws of motion, could know everything that is going to happen in the future, down to the minutest detail.

This Laplacian or Newtonian vision of universal physical determinism was taken for granted by many scientists and philosophers until the end of the nineteenth century, but it can no longer be taken for granted today. You are probably familiar with the claim that modern quantum physics has introduced indeterminism or chance into the physical world. Much of the behavior of elementary particles, it is said, from quantum jumps in atoms to radioactive decay, is not precisely predictable and can be explained only by statistical, not deterministic, laws. We are also told that the uncertainty and indeterminacy of this world of quantum physics, according to the standard view of it, is not due to our limitations as knowers, but to the unusual nature of elementary particles themselves, such as protons and electrons, which have both wavelike and particle-like properties. No superintelligence (not even God perhaps) could know the exact positions and momenta of all the particles of the universe at a given moment because the particles do not *have* exact positions and momenta at the same time (the Heisenberg uncertainty principle); hence their future behavior is not precisely predictable or determined.

One might think these indeterministic developments in modern physics would have disposed of philosophical worries about free will. Why be concerned that free will conflicts with determinism if determinism is not even true in the physical world? But the interesting fact is that despite these developments in physics, worries about free will did not go away in the twentieth century. Concerns about determinism of human behavior persist to this day, and debates about free will have become more heated than ever. Why is this so? There are four reasons why indeterministic developments in modern physics have not disposed of traditional concerns about free will and determinism.

First, the new quantum world of elementary particles is as mysterious as free will itself, and there is still much debate about how to interpret it. Standard views of quantum physics hold that the behavior of elementary particles involves chance and is undetermined. But these standard views have been challenged; and there exist alternative interpretations of quantum theory that are deterministic.¹ These alternative interpretations are the minority view among physicists at present, and they are controversial. But they cannot be ruled out. There is also the possibility that modern quantum physics will one day be superseded by a more comprehensive theory that

is deterministic. So the question of determinism in the physical world is not finally settled. But it is true that modern physics does give us more reason to believe that indeterminism and chance might have a more significant role to play in the physical universe than did the classical physics of Newton and Laplace. So there may be more room for free will in nature, though this is not guaranteed.

But there is a second problem. Suppose it were true that the behavior of elementary particles is not always determined? What would this have to do with *human behavior*? Contemporary determinists often point out that, while quantum indeterminacy may be significant for elementary particles, such as electrons and protons, its indeterministic effects are usually insignificant in large physical systems such as the human brain and body.² Complex physical systems involving many particles and higher energies tend to be regular and predictable in their behavior, according to quantum physics itself. Thus, modern determinists, such as Ted Honderich, argue that we can continue to regard human behavior as determined “for all practical purposes” or “near-determined,” whatever the truth may be about electrons and protons. And this is all that matters in free will debates.

A third point complicates matters even further. Suppose for the sake of argument that quantum jumps or other undetermined events in the brain or body *do* sometimes have large-scale undetermined effects on human behavior. How would this help with free will? Suppose a choice was the result of a quantum jump or other undetermined event in a person’s brain. Would this be a *free* or responsible choice? Such undetermined effects in the brain or body would happen by chance and would be unpredictable and uncontrollable, like the sudden occurrence of a thought or the jerking of an arm that one could not predict or control. Such an effect would be quite the opposite of what we take free and responsible actions to be.

A similar objection was made against the ancient Epicurean philosophers, who had argued that the atoms must “swerve” in chance ways if there was to be room in nature for free will. How, asked the critics, would chance swerves of the atoms help to give us free will? It seems that undetermined events happening in the brain or body would occur spontaneously and would be more of a nuisance, or a curse, like epilepsy, than an enhancement of our freedom. If free will is not compatible with *determinism*, it does not appear to be compatible with *indeterminism* either, since indeterminism would seem to be mere chance.

To these considerations, we can add a fourth and final reason why indeterministic developments in modern physics have not disposed of worries

about free will and determinism. At the same time that determinism has been in retreat in the physical sciences in the past century, developments in sciences other than physics—in biology, biochemistry, and neuroscience, in psychiatry, psychology, and other social and behavioral sciences—have been moving in the opposite direction. These other sciences have convinced many persons that more of their behavior than previously believed is determined by causes unknown to them and beyond their control.

Developments in sciences other than physics that suggest determinism have been many, but they surely include a greater knowledge of the influence of genetics and heredity on human behavior. (Note the controversy caused by the recent mapping of the human genome, which naturally arouses fears of future control of behavior by genetic manipulation.) Other relevant scientific developments have raised more questions. We now have a greater awareness of biochemical influences on the brain: hormones, neurotransmitters, and the susceptibility of human moods and behavior to different drugs that radically affect the way we think and behave. The advent of psychoanalysis and other theories of unconscious motivation have proposed new ways of thinking about the human brain, no less than the development of computers and intelligent machines that can do many of the things we can do even though they are preprogrammed (like Deep Blue, the chess master computer). Comparative studies of animal and human behavior have further enriched our understanding, suggesting that much of our motivation and behavior is a product of our evolutionary history, and helping us to see the influences of psychological, social, and cultural conditioning upon upbringing and subsequent behavior.

It is difficult not to be influenced by these scientific developments, which we can read about in the newspapers every day. To be sure, these newly discovered influences on our behavior do not prove definitively that we lack free will. There may still be some leeway for us to exercise our free will in the midst of all the biological, psychological, and social influences upon us. But these new scientific developments in fields other than physics do show why worries about the determinism of *human behavior* persist in contemporary debates about free will, despite indeterministic developments in physics. And continuing worries about determinism of human behavior make the second pivotal question we are going to address (in the next chapter) all the more important, namely, the Compatibility Question: does determinism really conflict with free will, or are the two compatible? If there really is no conflict between free will and determinism, as many modern thinkers believe, then we do not have to worry about all these new scientific threats to our freedom. For we could still be free and responsible, even if determinism should turn out to be true.

Suggested Reading

Three collections of readings on free will that deal with many of the topics of this book are Gary Watson (ed.) *Free Will* (Oxford, 2003), Robert Kane (ed.) *Free Will* (Blackwell, 2002), and Laura Waddell Ekstrom (ed.) *Agency and Responsibility: Essays on the Metaphysics of Freedom* (Westview, 2000). More advanced discussion of most of the topics of the book can be found in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Kane, ed., Oxford, 2002).