

Chapter 11

Forming the Will Freely

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This chapter takes up the classical problem of freewill, arguing that its traditional understanding remains virulent up to the present and has been unduly declared obsolete by mainstream philosophy. The established division into “compatibilism” and “incompatibilism” is rejected as misleading. However, after a brief clarification of the relevant notions of ‘will’ and ‘freedom’, drawing on the author’s extended earlier research, it is argued in detail that it is not possible to meet the two central criteria of ‘willing freely’ if one subscribes to determinism. First, one cannot specify any relevant notion of practical possibility. Second, unless one accepts strong metaphysical premises, one cannot rely, alternatively, on the criterion of processes of forming the will being “essential” (in some relevant sense) to the person in question. Still it is not necessary to dismiss ‘freewill’, as the conception of volitional states or processes as indetermined in part is ruled out neither by an unprejudiced scientific view of the world nor by the bad old argument from “blind chance”.

1. Dismissing the freewill problem?

‘Freewill’ is one of the great, old and possibly “eternal” enigmas of mankind. In 1437 the Renaissance philosopher Lorenzo Valla diagnosed that there is “scarcely a question more in need of being answered and less close to an answer at the same time” (Valla 1987, 62f.). Since then things have not changed essentially.

Yet many people think otherwise. Some are unconvinced of the topic’s *oldness*. In particular some scholars have claimed that ‘freewill’ is an invention of Judaeo-Christian theology unknown to the Greek tradition. This claim, however, proves false on both counts. On the one hand, it is simply not true that classical Greek philosophy and literature had no sense of the problem and its importance, although the first explicit characterization of the “will” (“*bulēsis*”) as being “free” or “unfree” (“*hekūision*” / “*akūision*”) is not documented earlier (to my knowledge) than by the Aristotelian *Magna Moralia*.¹ On the other hand, the mainstream of Christian theology did not affirm but rather denied ‘freewill’ in human beings as its existence would scarcely

1 Aristotle, *Magna moralia*, 1188a30–35.

be compatible with the belief in God's omniscience and omnipotence. So the idea is mistaken that 'freewill' was invented late or merely for theological reasons.

Other scholars believe the "classical" problem of freewill to have been *solved* long ago or antiquated. Von Wright, for example, diagnosed that this problem "is now gradually receding into obsolescence" (von Wright 1985, 110). Schlick in 1930 and Schopenhauer almost a century earlier even expressed anger at all those "ignorants" who "still spill much ink" on a subject they believed had been long since settled by the arguments of philosophers such as Hobbes or Hume.² And more recently Davidson dismissed it bluntly by citing a number of philosophical predecessors (including Hobbes, Hume and Schlick) who had done "what can be done, or ought ever to have been needed, to remove the confusions that can make determinism seem to frustrate freedom" (Davidson 1980, 63).

Now, the history of philosophy is full of examples of alleged "definite solutions" that turned out to be over-hasty. 'Freewill' is a case in point. Despite the prolonged philosophical efforts, the very problem proclaimed to be obsolete appears to be virulent up to the present. This does not hold only with respect to everyday, prescientific thought and public discussion in the media. Even many psychologists and neuroscientists think that the traditional enigma of 'freewill' is unsolved and needs solving by experimental evidence. Some of them are even so bold as to claim that there is already sufficient evidence to the effect that every act of conscious volition and thought is determined unconsciously on the physiological level. The ensuing controversial discussions show that the problem is still taken to be both unsolved and highly important. Accordingly, there are good reasons to be suspicious of straightforward claims to the contrary.

To be sure, scientists who believe in physiological determinism are likely to ignore these facts and to dismiss 'freewill' readily. Also philosophers in the vein of Schopenhauer and Schlick will insist that the "classical" problem has been solved independently of whether the physiologicistic claims are justified. To them the solution is conceptual rather than empirical and consists in the insight that the very idea of 'freewill' in question is ill-conceived and should be replaced by some other conception of willing and acting 'freely'. Both parties agree, however, in the conviction that the traditional belief in indeterministic volition or choice is spurious and should be dropped as an illusion. So it is mainly this conviction which must be looked at critically if one suspects that the old enigma is still unsolved.

2. Two general misconceptions

The widespread tendency to dismiss 'freewill' in its traditional sense stems from a double error. On the one hand, its significance for human self-understanding tends to be *underrated* due for the most part to a misconception of, or resigned disengagement from, what it really means to be active. On the other hand, its importance is badly *overrated* in that it is assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that 'willing freely' means

2 Schlick <1930>/1984, 155; Schopenhauer <1840>/1977, sect. III, vol. VI, 83.

ipso facto 'being entirely indetermined in what one wills' or (in the words of Kant) being independent "of the mechanism of nature in its entirety".³

The latter misconception is mirrored vividly by the established division into "compatibilism" and "incompatibilism". This distinction suggests that it is one and the same thesis that is affirmed by the one party and denied by the other. But this is misleading. First, the question of determination is only one of a number of different aspects of 'willing freely' and is not in itself a question of "all or nothing". Second and most important, what is at stake among the two parties is not whether one should accept or reject the *thesis* that "freedom and determinism are compatible". The real issue is how the *concept* of 'freedom' relevant to understanding ourselves as active beings, or as beings that are responsible for what they do, should be analysed or explicated. Consequently, the thesis affirmed by the so-called "compatibilists" is not the same thesis that is denied by the "incompatibilists". Also what kind, or kinds, of determination the latter want to deny and for what reasons and what kind, or kinds, of freedom are maintained by the former are open questions allowing for various answers.

3. Preliminary phenomenological clarifications

So let us forget from now on this unhappy categorization and go to work afresh. As elsewhere in philosophy, this work is for the most part conceptual and to a lesser degree phenomenological. Concerning the latter, two general points are obvious. First, human beings are far from independent "of the mechanism of nature in its entirety". Quite to the contrary, they are influenced in what they will and do by a vast number of determining factors, social as well as natural. But this does not mean in the least that they are determined *completely*. Denying universal determinism is not equivalent to affirming the extreme of universal indeterminism. And surely this extreme is not implied by the "classical" freewill problem. So let us not fool ourselves by quarrelling over spurious positions or fighting for or against straw men.

Second, the phenomenology of willing, intending and acting intentionally makes it clear that in discussing 'freedom of will' it is not possible for us to confine ourselves to single choices, decisions or so-called 'acts of volitions' at one *instant*. We have to take into account the *processes* leading up to them. Accordingly, it would be inadequate simply to ask whether a given volitional state is 'free', let alone to define 'freewill' simply by 'being indetermined in willing'. Rather, the adequate definition is: 'freedom to *form* one's will'.

This covers many different processes most of which include deterministic parts and elements, though they are not normally thought to be fixed throughout. Forming the will may consist in a spontaneous single act but need not. It may imply extended weighing of reasons and calculating means, ends and consequences. But it may also be confined to a quick decision. A more extensively reflecting person may try to stir up (time permitting) unconscious attitudes in the endeavour to find out what she "really wants" or "wants inmost" or to arrive at some "volitional equilibrium".

3 Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 1902ff., vol. V, 87.

Furthermore, reflection may or may not extend to volitions of a higher order, as has been countenanced by Augustine, Abelard and more recently Harry Frankfurt.⁴ All of these processes constitute relevant kinds of forming the will. And each of them raises the question of whether and to what extent they are fixed in advance by inner and outer determinants, and if so, what this would mean for calling them “free” or “unfree”.

4. The concept of willing

These questions, however, cannot be tackled unless we have some better idea of what we are talking about. So we must turn from mere phenomenology to conceptual clarification. Here we do not want to know, of course, what philosopher X or scientist Y have said that “freedom of will” is supposed to mean. There would be no end to listing different definitions and declarations. We want to know what we ordinarily mean when we say that active and responsible persons are capable of “forming volitional states freely”. And to know this we have to clarify first the constitutive general notions: ‘will’, ‘volition’ and ‘willing’ on the one hand, ‘freedom’ and ‘free’ on the other. To shorten my argument I will restrict myself to the results of my earlier research on these matters.

Concerning volition let us state first what willing is not. Obviously it is not a brain state or brain process. Suppose I am giving a talk. I know that I want to finish my talk, and the audience may want to raise some objections in the discussion. But neither I nor the audience know what corresponds to this in our brains. Nor do expert neurologists up to now, despite some ill-considered claims to the contrary referring (for example) to the “readiness potentials” measured by Libet and his followers.⁵ Findings like these are much too unspecific to represent concrete volitional states such as ‘wanting’ or ‘willing that p’. Moreover, they cannot *be* the relevant neurological correlates, if (as is reported) they are *prior* to conscious volition. That there is something going on in the brains of people consciously wanting or willing something, most probably something very complex, is not in doubt. But for the purpose of identifying our volitions these facts are simply irrelevant.

If willing is not a brain state or process, what is it? Behaviourists such as Hull or Berlyne⁶ proposed a dispositional analysis of intentional states like believing or willing, referring to interconnected internal states that are ascribed to human beings as “hypothetical constructs” (in the sense of MacCorquodale and Meehl [1948, 95–107]), viz. states or events thought to be realized physiologically. In a modified form this conception still survives under the name of “functionalism”. Now, though it is true that willing, in contrast to idle wishing, is *qualified* dispositionally, the

4 Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, I: 12, 26; 13, 29; II: 19, 51; III: 3, 7–8; *Confessiones*, VIII: 5, 10; 8, 20–24; *De civitate Dei*, V: 9–10; *De trinitate*, X: 11, 18; *Retractationes*, I: 13, 5; Abelard: *Ethica*, cap. 1–3, see also Saarinen 1994, 46, 51–7, 66–71, 85; Frankfurt 1988, ch. 2. For a more detailed account and critical discussion see Seebass 2006, ch. 5, sect. 8.

5 Libet 1985, 529–39; Haggard and Eimer 2001, 47–63; Haggard, Clark and Kalogeras 2002, 382–5.

6 Hull 1943; Berlyne 1965; see also Seebass 1981/1982.

idea of its *complete* dispositional explication is hopeless.⁷ Surely willing, believing and other intentional states can not be defined by the various “causal roles” they play in connecting relevant inner states or mediating between external stimuli and responses.

The core of willing, stripped of its motivational and possible further qualifications, is a conscious, intentional *optative attitude* related reciprocally to an assertoric attitude as its conceptual counterpart. Both states are elucidated in a preliminary way by the metaphor of “directions of fit” (in the vein of Anscombe, Searle and Tugendhat⁸). Much more can be said, however, about what this means and in what ways wanting, willing, deciding or intending differ from the mere optative.⁹ Still, as is the case with every basic notion, there are irreducible elements in it that cannot be analysed further, but must be grasped by the individual learning the relevant terms of language. Talk of unconscious or preconscious volition is derivative relative to its conscious form. Thus in the attempt to clarify ‘willing’ and processes of ‘forming one’s will’ we are referred to conscious, intentional and motivationally qualified states of willing.

5. The concept of freedom

Turning next to the concept of ‘freedom’ I will also take a shortcut. In the most general sense, being ‘free’ means being ‘unhindered’: Hobbes and Schopenhauer have argued for this,¹⁰ and their diagnosis is confirmed by ordinary language. More specific senses of “freedom” are subsumed easily. This refers in particular to the classical notions of ‘freedom of action’ and ‘freedom from constraint’ developed by Greek philosophy. Most forms of social, political and economic freedom are covered by these. Freedom of action means: being in a position to act as one wants or wills to act. Freedom from constraint is more complex, meaning in a broad sense almost the same as being unhindered but having several narrower meanings that overlap partly (already hinted at by Aristotle¹¹) with what we would call “freedom of will”. Freedom of will is another special case branching again into various subcases. First, however, let us look more closely at the concept of ‘hindrance’ itself.

Clearly this is a very general notion to be specified best by the questions as to what is hindered in what and by what. A river that is not hindered in its flow by dams or embankments is said to “flow freely”. A paralysed or tied man is “unfree” because he is hindered by abnormal (internal or external) impediments to move as he wants. The hindrance need not extend to every part or aspect and need not be absolute. Still it must be significant. Common to all subcases is the idea that something is restrained severely from evolving, living or existing in ways which are

7 For those readers who are inclined to think that this is still a plausible option, see my detailed reasons in Seebass 1993, ch. 4, sect. 3.

8 Anscombe 1957, 4f., 56f.; Searle 1983, 7–9, 167ff.; Tugendhat 1976, 505ff.

9 See Seebass 1993, ch. 4, 4–6, and Roughley forthcoming.

10 Hobbes 1961, vol. III, 196; vol. IV, 273f., 275f.; vol. V, 367f.; Schopenhauer <1840>/1977, vol. VI, 43f.

11 Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, III: 1–2.

“natural” or “essential” to it and therefore should not be precluded. Hence whether, in what respects and to what degree something is free or unfree has to be judged with reference to two dimensions: the relevant standard of “*naturalness*” and the relevant realm of theoretical *possibilities* actually closed or open.

Roughly, the greater the number of possibilities open, the lesser the hindrance and the greater the freedom. However, possibilities that do not touch on the relevant “nature” can be ruled out as inessential. Most of the infinite number of actions I might envisage but actually cannot do are irrelevant to my freedom as I do not and will never care about them in the least. Having decided spontaneously and on my own, for example, to go to a concert tonight I do not feel restricted in the least by the fact that in doing so I am no longer able to watch to the eightieth episode of a trivial soap opera on television. Conversely, the fact that my TV-set offers 80 programmes to me today instead of the two programmes I used to have does not enhance my freedom 40-fold if I do not care about the 78 additional programmes. Thus freedom implies open possibilities but only possibilities “essential” to the person in question.

Still what possibilities are “essential”? Starting with examples like the preceding one might suggest that this depends *simply* on what the relevant persons want or will. But even when confined to freedom of action this criterion is badly insufficient as has been shown even by ancient philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and most lucidly Plotinus.¹² It is not just that the volitional states of ordinary people can be, and all too often are, fleeting, rash or capricious. Even our considered, reasoned will is not “essential” *ipso facto* and likely to be “inessential” if formed (for example) under pressure, in ignorance or without reflection on concurring wants and volitions. So we must rely on a stronger criterion of “essentialness” relevant to our freedom. However, what criterion is adequate here?

One radical option would be to ignore the volitional states of people *entirely* and to state from an *external* position what is, or should be, considered “natural” or “essential” for them (similar to what we do when describing a river as “flowing freely”). This would amount to the claim that there are objective ideal standards of what befits people, taken individually or generically, in leading an “essential” form of life. Perhaps Plato’s critique of wilful democratic freedom is an early example of this.¹³ But even ignoring the strong metaphysical assumptions necessary to support this claim, it is quite implausible to define what belongs to the “essence” of a particular person independent of his or her particular mental states including volitions. Even the most experienced psychotherapists, closest personal friends, or most perceptive parents taking care of us during infancy cannot claim to “know better” what we “really want or will” independent of looking forward at least to our eventual reflective consent. Accordingly, individual volition cannot be given up as a *necessary* condition of “essentiality” although it needs to be strengthened substantially for it to become *sufficient*.

12 Plotinus, *Peri tū hekūsiū kai thelēmatos tū henos* / *Enneades*, VI: 8, 1–7.

13 Plato, *Res publica*, 557a–564b.

6. The deterministic challenge

Now, the most obvious way to do this is to add the requirement that the will in question is *free*, that is, has been *formed* freely on our own and unhindered (for example) by ignorance or severe physical, psychological or social pressure. However, in doing so we have to rely again on the double criteria of open possibilities and “essentialness”, with the only difference that both of these now do not refer to particular voluntary actions but to volitional states themselves. So it is all the more urgent to be clear about both conditions.

Here at the latest we face the “classical” freewill problem claimed to be settled or obsolete by many writers (cf. above, section 1). For, at least the possibilities criterion presents an obvious difficulty for anyone sharing deterministic convictions. So let us not be distracted by the untoward charge of “obsolescence” and consider in an unbiased manner what *determinism* would mean for “forming the will freely”.

As has been worked out lucidly by Aristotle, determinism is not confined to causal or nomological types.¹⁴ Rather, determinism is the thesis that every event is fixed without alternative – “*determinatum ad unum*” in the words of medieval writers¹⁵ – and therefore necessary in some sense, depending on the specific reasons for this fixation. More precisely, for every pair of (elementary or complex) propositions $p/\neg p$ and corresponding states of affairs, the realm of possibilities open is reduced to one, the relevant alternatives being definitely excluded. Determinism is an *ontological* thesis, not an epistemic one and thus independent of predictability. It is also a *general* thesis covering mental as well as physical events. According to such a conception, all of what we think, believe and will, all of our practical and theoretical reasonings are fixed without alternative. Whether this is due to the order of fate or god or to natural laws is immaterial. All that counts is the fact of fixation and its relevant implications.

7. The Augustinian solution

Obviously there are problems here, noticed at the latest by Aristotle, Epicurus and the Stoics. Accepting determinism for causal and theological reasons Augustine attempted to solve them.¹⁶ To save the ordinary assumption that freedom of action implies alternative options he invented the conditional analysis of the concept of practical possibility which allegedly ensures this *formally*. And to ensure the freedom of the conditioning will, he contrived a formal argument to the effect that volition is free *ipso facto*. Both of these theoretical devices have been adopted by myriads of theologians and philosophers up to now, at least in part and in a modified form. Unaware of their theological origin many of the so-called “compatibilists”

14 See in particular *De interpretatione*, cap. 9. For more details and a defence of an Aristotelian conception of determinism see Seebass 2006, ch. 6, sect. 1 (esp. notes 1–5).

15 See for example Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 22 a. 6; *Summa contra gentiles*, I: 68; *Summa Theologica*, I: q. 103 a. 1; III: q. 10 a. 4; Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II: d. 37 q. 2 n. 8, quoted in Sylwanowicz 1996, 199.

16 Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, III: 2, 14–4, 41; *De civitate Dei*, V, 9–10.

rely on them in the belief that they are achievements of modern philosophers such as Hobbes, Hume and Moore.

However, despite the respectable authority of St Augustine and all of his followers, both moves are flawed. The argument for intrinsic volitional freedom is invalid.¹⁷ But without an argument to this effect problems are merely shifted back to volition, albeit perhaps to volitions of a higher order. Moreover, the conditional analysis is no analysis of practical possibility at all as it does not extend to its relevant modal sense. Of course we might say (following Duns Scotus and Leibniz¹⁸) that it is not logically impossible to form a different will. Also we might say that this possibility is not ruled out by the mere laws of nature or by the general abilities of ordinary people. However, abstract possibilities such as these are not relevant to the problems we are trying to solve. Certainly we do not care about alternatives existing in some imaginary possible world *beyond*, but are interested in concrete alternative ways of forming the will that are open to us in the *actual* world. And such alternatives are ruled out by assuming our world to be deterministic.¹⁹

So let us not waste time on the illusive endeavour to find some notion of ‘practical’ or ‘volitional possibility’ that is relevant to freedom (in the usual sense explicated above) and fits a deterministic universe. Rather the disillusioning fact is this: once we have subscribed to ontological determinism we have *dismissed* the possibilities criterion radically. Measured against this standard every kind of freedom will have a *zero* degree as there is no alternative to the result fixed. Still we are left with the criterion of “naturalness” or “essentialness” which could be sufficient in itself and therefore might be used by determinists to fill the gap. But, leaving aside Augustine’s argument for intrinsic volitional freedom, how could this be provided?

8. Absence of external control

First let us try the following line of argument. Obviously one necessary condition of volitional “essentialness” is the absence of a particular form of external control. Suppose the thoughts and volitions of a particular man are determined completely and at every instant by some god or neuropsychiatric “demi-god”. Certainly we would not call the resulting will “essential” as this man is but a marionette. Still one might argue that this is due solely to the fact that his mental processes are manipulated wilfully from *outside* and not due to the *mere* fact of determination. Accordingly, one might think that all we would need when taking some person’s will to be “essential” is the guarantee that it is not controlled completely by the will of another person.

But this idea is wrong. To see this we only have to suppose that the will of our determining god or neuropsychiatric “demi-god” is determined in turn by some other god or “demi-god”. Surely the *mere* fact that the determining factors are of a *volitional* kind is no proof that it is this fact that renders the resulting will

17 See Rowe 1964, 356–63, and Seebass 1997, 239ff.

18 See Söder 1999, 92ff., 171ff., 203, and Leibniz 1967, 62ff.; 1948, 418ff.; 1999, vol. II, 654ff.; *Théodicée*, sections 36ff., Appendix III; *Letter to Pierre Coste 19.12.1707*.

19 For an extended argument to this effect and a detailed critique of the conditional analysis see Seebass 2006, ch. 7.

“inessential”. Only a will shown to be “essential” and free by a criterion different from the mere absence of external volitional control could be sufficient to stop the regress into relevant antecedent conditions.

Moreover, if the determining influence is complete and external, it does not matter *at all* whether or not it is volitional. Suppose some person’s brain gets (either by chance, natural determination, or wilful contrivance) under the influence of some electromagnetic super-field determining in every detail its neuronal processes in every detail as well as, supposedly, the entire set of mental events attached to them in an epiphenomenalist way, including volitions. Could we say this person is able to form her will “freely and essentially”? Certainly not. But if so, why should we not come to exactly the same negative conclusion when we consider all such events to be the mere product of the indefinite multiplicity of interacting influences emanating from the “super field” of a deterministic universe? Obviously we are far away from being able to single out processes leading up to “essential” volitions and therefore badly in need of criteria qualified for this task.

9. General patterns of forming the will

Trying to take up this problem within the confines of determinism, basically two solutions have been suggested. First it is said that the will is free if its formation satisfies certain *general patterns* that can be regarded as “natural” or “essential”. Some philosophers have been content even with the unspecific condition of being “amenable to reasons”. But this is wholly inadequate as it is not immune even to the classical objections raised against “inessential” volition since Plato. Others, along with jurists, have tried to specify lists of characteristic epistemic defects and restraints the absence of which defines, allegedly, what “willing freely” means. Alternatively, or in addition to this, it has been suggested that the degree of freedom and “essentialness” depends on the extent to which positive standards of reflectiveness, rationality, length and complexity are met when forming the will. All of this is quite plausible as far as it goes and adequate even for practical purposes, say in the courts. But it is surely inadequate theoretically.

First, it is indifferent to the question of whether the optative attitudes that are *fed into* an informed, unrestrained and extended formation process are free and “essential” from the start. Second, it is confined to the *average*, ignoring what is “essential” for a particular person at a particular time. Third and even more important, why are extended processes of reflective reasoning *relevant* to freedom at all? Normally we would say that engaging in these is the best, and most often only, way to find out what alternative options we have, which is in turn a precondition for choosing freely which options we should realize. However, if determinism is true, belief in real alternatives is spurious, or can be no more than a subjectively unavoidable illusion. Objectively (as long since noted by Aristotle²⁰) there would be no point in reasoning processes of that kind, as their entire courses and outcomes are fixed. Some persons

20 Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, 18b31–3; *Ethica Nicomachea*, 1112a18–26, 1139b5–11, 1140a31–1140b1, 1141b10f.; *Ethica Eudemica*, 1226a20–31.

would be determined to need a long run-up before coming to a decisive volition, others to take a shortcut. But if so, why should the former course be more “essential” to the determined person than the latter? To make a substantial distinction here we would have to fall back on the strange idea that there exists some (Platonic) ideal standard of what befits human beings to be applied from “beyond”. Moreover, are there not many quick, spontaneous decisions (such as to go to a concert tonight [cf. above, section 5]) that we take to be “essential” quite independent of the fact that they do not result from extended reasonings?

Fourthly and finally, granting even the inherent “essentiality” of certain general patterns as a mere stipulation, we still get no answer to the most central point. Why should we say of some man luckily determined (by god, fate or natural causes) to *satisfy* them that he has formed an “essential” will in this case any more than in another case where he unluckily happens to be determined *not* to fulfil them? Here at the latest we are definitely at a loss. Clearly, this shallow-rooted notion of freedom, contrived for practical reasons at best, if not merely to fit in with a determinist bias, is squarely beside the point.

10. Personal characteristics

Still there is a second solution, proposed independently or in support of the first. Here the idea is to relate the notion of an “essential will” to what we are as a *character*. Could we not simply say, independently of the specific patterns of their formation, that certain mental states and processes, including volitions, are “essential” for some person *ipso facto* if they are taken to be defining? This would be a nice solution indeed. However, what volitions will qualify?

Some people foster the idea that there might be some limited *stable set* of optative and assertoric attitudes to be discovered (by reflection or progressive self-experience) to be constitutive of what we are. However, if this were true, we should be able to list at least some of the most basic attitudes supposed to be definitional. But are you able to do this? And on what grounds could the defining attitudes be selected? Merely because of their *factual* (genetic, educational or habitual) entrenchment? Hardly. Such attitudes can be taken as well, and are taken frequently, to be mere conditions under which we live or even hindrances to our thinking and forming the will in a way we regard as “essential”. To make them part of our personality, we have to *accept* them, that is, decisively to “appropriate” them (as Goethe put it) or to “identify ourselves” with them (as has been put more recently by Harry Frankfurt).²¹ If this is done, however, the resulting accommodation is not normally thought to be a passive reaction but to involve, contrary to determinist claims, an active decision among alternatives actually open. Moreover, although it is true that the possibilities of actively forming our character, or of dissociating ourselves by free decision from what has become habitual and entrenched inactively and without notice are limited, they surely are not inexistent altogether.

21 Goethe, *Faust*, verses 682f.; Frankfurt 1988, 21f., 166f.

Some authors claim to have found some general, stable volitions that qualify as definitive. Thus Hobbes thought that preserving biological life is the only unchanging object of our guiding will. Bentham, Freud and many others thought that it is gain and preservation of pleasure. But a short look at human history makes clear that even these very general and unspecific goals, which are unfit to single out individuals anyway, do not qualify as defining personal characteristics. A suicide-bomber surely does not care very much for his physical life and pleasure. Personal life is an ongoing *dynamic* process made up not only of passive, receptive experiences but also of instances of *actively forming* our attitudes towards facts and possibilities. This is the central element in setting the standards of what is “essential” for us and therefore of hindrances relevant to our freedom. Accordingly, they are subject to change. A volition we firmly “identify with” at present may well be dissociated later on. And even if some basic volitions were to be stable and definitive of what we are, it would certainly be absurd to claim that all of our concrete willings and doings are free and unhindered only to the extent they can safely be referred to those.

Because he lacks the criterion of an objective (non-illusory) active choice among open alternatives, however, the only way out that a determinist can envisage is the heroic move taken by Kant and Schopenhauer.²² Both of them proposed that the *entire set* of our prevailing volitions defines the “empirical character”, indicating successively – to ourselves and to others as well – who we are as a person. Granting determinism, this is a consistent and respectable idea, even though it is highly counter-intuitive. Surely we do not think that the multifarious trivialities and contingencies of our lives are constitutive for us as persons. Moreover, we do not merely register passively whatever volitions happen to crop up in our minds.

But let us waive these objections here as the most central problem of the proposal is this: if *every* prevailing volition is “essential” by definition, this predicate no longer refers to a distinguishing property which might be used as a *criterion*. Having lost our first – possibilities – criterion of freedom anyway by accepting determinism (see above, section 7), we have lost now our second criterion too. Given a strictly deterministic universe, our ordinary concept of freedom, that is, freedom from relevant hindrances, simply does not apply. And this is true not only concerning freedom of will but also freedom of action as this concept depends (as has been argued above, section 8) on the criterion of “willing essentially” too. All of this leads to the conclusion that a consequent determinist must say, provided he is luckily determined to be consistent, that ‘freedom’ understood in its ordinary sense is spurious objectively and can be held to exist only by subjective illusion.

11. Counterintuitive consequences

So we are confronted again with the great old enigma of freewill, which has turned out to be unsolved up to now and unsolvable in principle if one accepts determinism and does not want to give up our ordinary notion of ‘freedom’. Construed in this way

²² Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 566ff.; Schopenhauer <1840>/1977, vol. VI, 87ff., 133ff.

we *must* say, after all, that these convictions are incompatible. Accordingly, one of them should be dropped. What about dropping freedom, then, as understood in its usual sense? Could one not argue, contrary to common belief, that this notion is not important to our lives and that this is the reason why the “classical” problem, while being still unsolved, should “recede into obsolescence” (cf. above, section 1)?

In fact, many philosophers and theologians have argued that this sweeping move is the best, or at least the only advisable, way out of the “wand’ring mazes” in which we get lost (as Milton put it) when “reasoning high” about freewill, misguided by “vain wisdom” and “false philosophy”.²³ Still it is ill-advised. As noted earlier (section 2), dismissing ‘freewill’ in its traditional and ordinary sense would mean underrating badly its significance for human self-understanding due to a misconception of, or resigned disengagement from, what it really means to be active. If what we want and do, as well as the ways by which we come to it, are fixed in advance and in every detail, we cannot – lest by illusion – understand ourselves as real actors, that is, as persons having an active influence by themselves on what actually happens. Much *more* even than in any mocking caricature drawn of the medieval “corporative state”, *here* every individual, every group or institution would have their “assigned places” within the structuring social system which in itself would be but a segment within the fixed and all-inclusive order of being. Accordingly, such persons cannot understand themselves, or be taken by others, as rational and responsible actors. And as this condition is implied by the traditional system of normative social control, which differs from merely manipulatory forms of shaping behaviour, this system will become inapplicable, too.

In fact the consequences are even more radical. They lead to a *fatalist* view of life. Of course this does not refer to the so-called fatalism of “lazy reason”, better called “foolish reason”, as it rests on the denial of obvious causal dependencies. This idea is ill-conceived and not consequently deterministic. Fatalism, rightly conceived, includes the mental realm and amounts to the thesis that the course of the world, being fixed throughout, cannot be altered (theoretically) and therefore cannot be influenced actively (in the relevant practical sense of “can”). Within philosophy this should have been settled ever since Aristotle. More recently Richard Taylor (1962, 56–66; 1963, ch. 5) has renewed the same argument provoking dozens of articles which vainly tried to refute it. Clearly, a consistent determinist must be a fatalist – provided he is happily determined to be consistent.

12. Dismissing underlying prejudices

In view of this, philosophers with a temper similar to that of Schlick and Schopenhauer (cf. above, section 1) might grow angry about the fact that there are still so many “ignorants” “spilling ink” in the hopeless endeavour to get around what is obvious by contriving, following the lead of St Augustine, some substitute notion of ‘freedom’ that fits a fixed universe and still preserves an understanding of ourselves as active and responsible persons.

23 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II: 555–65.

In fact, these hopeless endeavours are motivated by a double belief, namely (1) that determinism is *true*, or might well be true, as the universe is confined to what can be accounted for in strictly “naturalistic” terms and therefore must be seen as “causally” or “nomologically closed”, and (2) that the only way to *deny* determination is to affirm “blind chance”. Now, I am not in a position to prove or refute either determinism or naturalism. But I think that it is possible to deny both of these and that to do so is (at the very least) not as desperate as are the continuing illusions or self-deceptions about the consequences that would result from their truth for rationality, activity, responsibility and personal freedom. Whether microphysical indeterminism, taken to be implied – *pace* David Bohm – by standard quantum theory, could be of any use to freewill is unclear to me. Some of the relevant proposals, for example those of Kane or Hameroff and Penrose,²⁴ are certainly subject to the objection of “blind chance”. Others might well be better off. But I know of none which is satisfying. So I must leave it with this. Before ending this chapter, however, I would like to draw attention to one further important point.

Even confining ourselves to the physical world and natural science, it is amazing to see how many people still believe that determinism, though unproven, *must* be true. It is not just the existence of quantum physics. Any experimental physicist knows the insuperable dispersions in measurement. Most theories rely on probabilistic rather than deterministic laws if they formulate general laws at all and do not confine themselves to regularities and correlations. All of this holds all the more strongly if we move up to psychological, social and cultural phenomena. Humankind has always lived in a world full of probabilities and contingencies not amenable to deterministic calculation. To believe that this is merely the result of epistemic defects that could be overcome is (at the very best) a useful methodological maxim and apart from that, as a general ontological thesis, simply an ideology.

To me the only understandable reason for this is fear of “*blind chance*”. Surely our world is not full of this, though chance, apparently, cannot be excluded. But anyhow, to deny that something is determined is not in the least equivalent to affirming that it happens “by mere chance”. The false belief to the contrary is one of the big blunders made repeatedly ever since the early critics of Epicurus. The existence of statistically constant marriage and suicide rates, for example, proves neither that individual marriages and suicides are matters of mere chance, nor that some people are determined somehow to marry or to kill themselves (as believed by some of the early nineteenth-century interpreters of “moral statistics”).²⁵ Both kinds of events may well result from undetermined free decisions of individual persons. Indeterministic freedom may not exist in reality, but it is surely not inconceivable or conceivable only at the expense of being “chancy”. This argument against those who are still interested in making sense of our self-understanding as free, active and responsible persons, this bad old ploy at least should disappear completely from the discussion.

24 Hameroff and Penrose 1997, 177–95; Kane 1998, pt. II.

25 See Hacking 1983, 468ff.; 1990, chs 13–15.

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