

Foreword

Many worry that our growing understanding of the brain mechanisms that regulate behavior threatens our deeply entrenched conception of freedom and our ability to hold individuals responsible for their actions. If popular science accounts are to be believed, scientists have already demonstrated that there is no such thing as ‘free will’ or that, at best, free will is a conscious illusion. That science, and neuroscience in particular, has demonstrated no such thing as the absence of freedom in a causally governed universe should be obvious to anyone acquainted with the scientific literature on consciousness and behavior. But suspicions persist and unease about the inevitable demise of a much-cherished conception of what we are (and are capable of) – not merely as biological and social entities, but as persons endowed with such distinctive capacities as pondering, deliberating, and acting for a reason – has taken the place of sober reflection, at least for most lay people.

But even among the philosophically savvy, the question of whether freedom is incompatible with determinism frames much of the contemporary conversation. Those who look to science for answers may reason that it is just a matter of time before science settles the question of free will once and for all (and settles it against deeply entrenched beliefs about libertarian freedom). Even hard-nosed incompatibilists, who think freedom is incompatible with determinism, are weary that concepts such as intention, deliberation, decision, and the weighing of reasons, may not suffice to allay general anxieties about the possible (and not merely presumed) explanatory reducibility of the mental states these concepts represent. Whether indeterminism is less threatening to free will than determinism is an open question. Indeed, in a universe of purely random events, the idea that we could be the agents of uncaused actions is even more superfluous than taking agency to be a psychological fiction, albeit a useful one.

Western views of the relationship between free will and determinism began to take shape at the dawn of the modern era, marked in part by a revival of interest in classical moral theories and their preoccupation with virtue and human flourishing. They also have their roots in a critique of the rigid and presumably infallible principles of Judeo-Christian morality advanced by the French moralists (e.g., Montaigne, Pascal, and La Rochefoucauld) and the British sentimentalists (e.g., Hume, Smith, Shaftesbury). As pre-modern conceptions of humans

occupying a fixed place in the natural and social order give way to new forms of personal identity, the problem of free will takes center stage. It is this free-willing human, with all her foibles, dispositions, and candid aspirations of freedom, that becomes the harbinger of Enlightenment-era conceptions of rationality and of all subsequent Western disputes about whether morality is (or should be) grounded in the laws of nature or in the laws of reason.

Indeed, a great deal of modern Western thought is concerned with individual autonomy and the unlocking of human potential in a world that is no longer governed by inscrutable divine laws. While the existence of free will is not always implicitly assumed, the main concern seems to be with how best to express it. Those who question the possibility of free will in a deterministic universe need look no further than to the great social upheavals of our modern era, from the abolition of monarchy and the divine rights of kings to the end of slavery and the women's liberation movement. Critics, arguing from a naturalist standpoint, object that what is here invoked as an expression of free will is but the messy unraveling of the evolutionary drama of the human animal, constrained by its phylogeny and bound by environmental factors to a course of action that is ultimately reducible to natural causes: climate change, fertility rates, disease, the scarcity or abundance of resources, genetic mutations, and other impersonal factors. Are free will and determinism compatible? Is there a way of reconciling our first-personal account of volitional action with third-person perspectives of their underlying physical and biological processes? Is there another, perhaps more enlightened, way of conceiving of humans, or, indeed, of being human, that demands a radical reassessment of our understanding of voluntary action and of the causal and motivational factors that inform, condition, and sanction our value judgments?

Buddhism is unique among the world's great philosophical traditions in articulating a conception of action that, it seems, dispenses altogether with the notion of agent-causation. While Buddhists pursue what are unmistakably moral ends, there is no stable self or agent who bears the accumulated responsibility for initiating those pursuits, and seemingly no normative framework against which some dispositions, thoughts, and actions are deemed auspicious and thus worthy of cultivation, while others are not so deemed. It is not surprising, therefore, to find a near universal lack of agreement among contemporary interpreters about whether Buddhist metaphysics, with its reductionist, no-self view, has any room for a notion of free will. And yet, to millions of contemplative practitioners worldwide, Buddhist metaphysics provides as accurate a descriptive account of the immediacy of lived experience as is possible outside the confines of modern experimental psychology. The explosion of the mindfulness phenomenon, backed in large measure by empirical studies purporting to demonstrate that you can 'train' your brain to achieve ever greater degrees of freedom and autonomy, appears to lend credibility to Buddhism's millennia-old claim that disciplined cultivation can reverse deeply entrenched forms of psychological conditioning.

In the most comprehensive study to date of Buddhism and free will, Rick Repetti, a philosopher by training and long-time contemplative practitioner, makes a compelling case that in laying out his eightfold path program, the Buddha aimed

to produce ‘meditation virtuosos’ – individuals exhibiting extraordinary feats of mind-control far in excess of what champions of free will think the capacity to ‘do otherwise’ entails. Charting a new theoretical path between the extremes of hard incompatibilism, determinism, and indeterminism, Repetti articulates a highly original version of compatibilism that, while rooted in the Buddhist tradition, draws on the wealth of empirical evidence from the neuroscience of meditation. Readers looking for a clear and comprehensive introduction to the free will debate, and researchers curious to find out what the empirical literature on mindfulness practice can contribute to conceptions of agency and responsibility, will find *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom* extraordinarily useful. By exploring the neural basis of enlightened moral agency, Repetti offers a sustained, nuanced, and in-depth defense of the view that the correlations between subpersonal processes (specifically those that regulate affective, retributive, and cognitive behavior) and first-person accounts (of the cultivation of compassion, forbearance, or equanimity) should be understood, contrary to popular belief, as extending rather than limiting the scope of human freedom.

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