

## Possible meanings of the expression 'the will is free'

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

*Essay written by Francis Bennion in November 1946 as an undergraduate at Balliol College Oxford when reading Politics, Philosophy and Economics (Modern Greats).*

When we say 'the will is free' we may mean that man is able to act freely in one of three different ways. In the first sense of the expression a free act is understood to be an act performed in accordance with the dictates of reason. In the second sense it is understood to be an act prompted by motives arising out of the character of the individual. In the third sense it is considered to be a result of undetermined choice – unaffected by any pre-existing quality of the individual. We will now proceed to examine each of these conceptions in detail.

If it is said that an act is only free if it follows and springs from a correct process of reasoning (i.e. a process undistorted by desires and caprices) then it follows that all reasonable persons would, when placed in the same situation, only be acting freely if they all acted in the same way.<sup>1</sup> This appears faintly ridiculous, but if the proposition is examined more closely it can be seen that it is a perfectly valid interpretation of free-will. Kant, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*<sup>2</sup> states that 'what is essential in the moral worth of actions is *that the moral law should directly determine the will*'. He goes on to show that the only *feeling* which it is possible to know by a priori methods is the feeling of *respect* for the moral law. This naturally carries with it a feeling of respect for the good man, because he is demonstrating that it is possible to conform to the moral law. In fact, Kant implies, the only concrete thing for which it is possible to feel respect is a man who is good. If then our reason tells us that we can only be entitled to respect if we follow the moral law it is only proper to rely on reason to indicate those actions which may be termed moral actions, and, as no other actions have moral worth it is clear that pure practical reason will never lead us to the commission of a bad act. Thus, if we say that only a rational act is free we must imply that the only free acts are good acts, and the only good acts are those which are also free. In this way freedom is completely identified with goodness and the expression 'The will is free' means also 'The will is good'. This is the basis of Kant's doctrine: the only truly good thing is the good will, and a man is free insofar as he moves in accordance with the good will and not free when the purpose of the good will is frustrated by desires and passions.

The second view of free-will implies that a volition is a free volition in so far as it results from the character and motives of the individual, apart from the action of external forces and the effect of physiological reflexes. In this sense good and bad actions alike may be free, as long as they are actions natural to the character as formed by inherited traits and the influences of previous experience. The character in this sense may be imagined as a track through a thick jungle which has resulted from the passage of innumerable vehicles. Each succeeding vehicle, while broadly following the track once it was made, has nevertheless caused various lesser or greater alterations in it.

By the time a man has reached mature years his character is usually to a large extent static. The jungle track has been laid out and is now clear and definite. Each vehicle that passes merely helps to keep the track flattened down – it does not materially alter it. However two possibilities may occur to change the even tenor of the traffic. Some gigantic vehicle may pass along the track, uprooting the surface and possibly widening the boundaries, or, on the other hand, one of the vehicles may drive completely off the track and become lost in the undergrowth. We may think of the man as the driver of the vehicles, which themselves represent his acts. If he drives cars which are never too large for the

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<sup>1</sup> Mr Crombie shows that a deduction that the first view of free-will involves every purely rational being acting in the same way when placed in the same circumstances overlooks the question of probability, which is beyond the power of human reason to decide unequivocally.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter III.

track, and never goes off it, we may say he is leading a rather humdrum existence but, if we take the view of free-will which is now being discussed, we will not deny that his acts are free. He may drive when he likes, he may drive which of the vehicles he pleases. If he decides one day to try driving a bulldozer up the track, thus altering it in some way, we should say his character is being enlarged or altered. However, if one day he drives right off the track and crashes into the undergrowth, we shall hardly suggest that he does it 'freely'. This parallel of the jungle track helps us to understand why limitations of character do not, when influencing an act, vitiate the freedom of the act, and illustrates the view taken by many moralists that 'True freedom implies determination of conduct by character'.

The third view of free-will, that of 'undetermined choice', implies 'a power of originating acts which have absolutely no connection with or relation to the self as it was before the act'.<sup>3</sup> In fact this means complete aimlessness – what Matthew Arnold called 'bondage to the passing moment'. As Hegel said, indeterminism of this kind passes over into its opposite, determinism.

Which of these three views can best be defended against the claims of the determinist? With regard to the first or Kantian view we may quote the words of Dr Rashdall: 'The idea that goodness or the service of God is "perfect freedom" is from a practical point of view an extremely valuable and stimulating idea. But it obviously involves a metaphor, and its introduction into the controversy between Determinism and its opposite has led to endless confusion. The idea is one which, in works of technical ethics at least, had better be expressed in some other way.' That all writers on the subject do not agree with this verdict is illustrated by the following quotation from *Fundamentals of Ethics* by the American, W M Urban:

When we understand the meaning and the reason of conduct, and when that reason becomes our conscious motive and the very determinant of character, then all conduct springing from that character is ethically free.

It is probably acceptable on all sides that a man possessed of perfect reasoning powers and a Will so strong that it could always command action in the light of perfect reason might be said to be absolutely free, and that no lesser creature could really possess freedom. This however is not a doctrine of human free-will at all. We are concerned with humanity alone in considering the question of free-will and determinism, and it is of little help to say that if the will could loose itself from the claims of passion, desire etc., it would achieve freedom.

The third view of free-will is hardly tenable for a moment, and we are left with what is more or less the common-sense or intuitive view that we are free to move in a manner limited by a large number of factors, which do not serve to coerce us any more than a writer is coerced by the necessity for conforming to the rules of grammar, the laws of logic and the canons of style. We shall find complete freedom and complete determinism alike defying proof, and there can be little doubt that the true position lies somewhere between the extremes – perhaps corresponding to what is understood by the expression of 'self-determinism'.

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<sup>3</sup> Rashdall.