

FREE WILL

An historical and philosophical
introduction

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INTRODUCTION

This book is concerned with sixteen thinkers of the Western world who have had something to say about that condition of human existence in which human beings are in bondage: what it means, whether it is in any sense inevitable and, if it is, how one can turn away from it and move towards greater autonomy and freedom. What is free will and in what way is it distinctive of and grounded in human existence? The thinkers in question thus are (i) those who have had something to say about *human life*, what people have to contend with in it, their capacities and weaknesses, and (ii) those who have had some light to shed on the *concepts* in terms of which we try to understand these things and some of the *problems* they raise for us when we think about them.

It follows a historical order. The first four thinkers belong to early Greece. As far as the problem of human freedom goes their main concern is the way human beings become the plaything of certain common human propensities. What Plato had to say about the way evil enslaves men whereas in goodness they find themselves and hence autonomy in their actions echoes through the thinking of a number of the thinkers considered.

The next two thinkers, St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, are steeped in Christianity in their thinking. They are both concerned with what the reality of free will, which they take as a gift of God, consists in and the way we differ from animals in our possession of it. If the possibility of evil presupposes our possession of free will and it is God who has given us free will, does that make God responsible for the evil in the world? If though we fall by our own will we cannot rise except by God's grace, how is free will compatible with God's grace? And if God is omniscient and therefore knows what will happen in the future and so what we shall ourselves do, does that not rob us of our free will? The problem of free will thus assumes a theological dimension in their writings. This is in addition to the ethical dimension it inherits from the period of the early Greeks.

Third we have Descartes, Spinoza, Hume and Kant. Prominent in their thinking about human freedom is a new dimension which comes with the rise

of the sciences: does the empire of causality leave any logical space for human freedom – freedom of choice and action? Each, in their own different way, tries to find room for it. The book critically considers their different solutions to this problem and the metaphysical framework within which it is offered. It considers the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body and the way it mars Descartes' account of the will and its freedom, and also the dichotomy between reason and passion and the way it has pushed Kant and Hume in opposite directions. While what Spinoza had to say has more than one strand, the book concentrates on one of these, namely what he had to say directly about human life.

In the fourth and last group we have first Schopenhauer and Freud who the book sees as close in their impressions of the way men are enslaved in their confinement to the repetitive patterns that run through their lives. This is the substantive aspect of their determinism. But they both confuse it with the reign of causality. The book tries to disentangle these two strands in their thinking. It considers critically Schopenhauer's account of human motivation as a form of causality and in the chapter on Freud it argues that what Freud offers in his tripartite divisions of the personality are not immutable structures but dissociations within the personality which it is the aim of psycho-analytic therapy to heal. It is in the wholeness of personality towards which the analysand moves as these divisions are healed and inner conflicts are resolved that the analysand finds greater autonomy and hence freedom.

Sartre has something important to say about the freedom which is an integral part of human existence, the responsibility with which it saddles the individual, and the freedom he loses in trying to evade this responsibility in bad faith. He has criticized and rejected Descartes' dualism and his solipsism, but he still finds something he considers important in Descartes' conception of the will as inalienably free. The chapter on Sartre considers his very interesting development of this Cartesian idea.

In this group of thinkers Simone Weil stands on her own. Her knowledge of history, her love of early Greek literature and philosophy, her profound thought on Christianity and other world religions, her close acquaintance with science and its history, and her personal identification with the oppressed put her in a unique position to talk about the 'necessities' to which human life is subject and the freedom that is possible within their context. What she has to say is inspired by Plato and bears a very close affinity to his views. It also exhibits some remarkable affinities with Spinoza.

The chapter on Moore considers his discussion of the compatibility between the freedom of the will and the general law of causality, and the one on Wittgenstein considers his 'Lecture on Free Will' which is roughly in the same area as the one in which Moore's problem arises. The lecture was delivered in Cambridge in 1945–6 or 1946–7 and constructed from notes taken at the lecture by Yorick Smythies. In it Wittgenstein simply raises some

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questions about the claim that human behaviour may be governed by laws, whether it is predictable and, if it is, whether this excludes freedom of choice.

The discussions of each chapter are on the whole based on a single short text by the writer, though some references are made to some of his other works. The main texts used are the following:

- 1 Homer: the *Iliad*, and Simone Weil: 'L'Iliad ou le Poem de la Force'
- 2 Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex*
- 3 Plato: the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*
- 4 Aristotle: *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Books III and VI
- 5 St Augustine: *On Free Choice of Will* (or *De Libro Arbitrio*)
- 6 St Thomas Aquinas: *De Veritate*, 'On Free Choice'
- 7 Descartes: *Meditations*
- 8 Spinoza: *Ethics* Books IV and V
- 9 Hume: *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*
Kant: *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics*
- 10 Schopenhauer: *On the Freedom of the Will*
- 11 Freud: *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Ch 2 and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Ch 3
- 12 J-P Sartre: *Being and Nothingness*, Pt IV, Ch 1, 'Being and Having: Freedom'
- 13 Simone Weil: *Gravity and Grace*
- 14 G E Moore: *Ethics*, Ch 6, 'Free Will'
- 15 Wittgenstein: 'Lecture on the Freedom of the Will', *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol 12, No 2, April 1989.

These texts are considered with critical sympathy, but the book itself has something to contribute to the questions raised in them in its own voice. What it argues may be summed up as follows:

1 The problem of freedom and determinism is a cluster of problems and thus has many sources.

2 Broadly speaking some of these sources are *a priori* considerations; others are particular perspectives on human life and the light by which human action is seen when viewed from such perspectives. But the substantive question which actions so seen may raise, 'Are human beings *really* free, as we *normally* assume them to be?' can turn into the *a priori*, conceptual question, 'Can they be said to act freely? Does not the notion of a free action involve a contradiction?' Thus the question about human freedom may have mixed sources and a mixed character. Equally, in the other direction, a thinker who responds to *a priori* questions about human freedom, even within the framework of an elaborate metaphysics, may manage to say something penetrating about human life and the predicament of human beings in such a life.

3 Spinoza is a supreme example of this. His ‘solution’ is developed in response to Descartes’. It bridges the philosophical divides between body and soul, passion and reason. It argues that the individual can attain a state of freedom not by imposing his will on his passions, as in Descartes, nor by siding with reason at the expense of emotions, as in Kant, nor yet by following passion ‘prompted and directed by reason’, as in Hume. It can only do so by giving up the will – effort of will – and submitting to an order of which we all are a small part. Here we act in the light of a reason that is at one with emotion: ‘active emotion’. It can also be called ‘affective reason’.

Spinoza thus engages with the ‘modern’ problems concerning the apparent conflict between freedom and causality. Yet he uses a highly metaphysical system of concepts, developed to sort out difficulties he finds with Cartesian philosophy, to think about the plight of human beings rooted in an order that is indifferent to their self-centred will. The chapter on Spinoza sees his solution as religious and exhibiting affinities with Simone Weil’s contribution as inspired by Plato. In its discussion of his contribution it tries to cut through his metaphysics and to get to what he had to say about human life.

4 The book distinguishes between four sources of the problem of ‘freedom and determinism’: (i) The roles of ‘chance and necessity’ in human life and the impotence of the individual’s will in the face of it. This is emphasized especially in early Greek thought, (ii) Some theological concepts in Christian thinking constitute an additional source of the problem, notably those of God’s grace and His foreknowledge, including His knowledge of each individual’s future actions, (iii) A third source of the problem for ‘modern’ philosophers has been the apparent incompatibility between human free will and the general law of causality, (iv) A fourth source is to be found in the perception of the endless repetition of the same patterns of action and behaviour in individual lives, the impotence of the will to change these patterns, and the degree to which such impotence is rooted in self-division and self-deception. We find this source at work in Schopenhauer’s and Freud’s determinism; but in *some* ways what we have here are the ‘necessities’ in early Greek thought in a modern guise.

5 In connection with (i) above the early chapters of the book discuss how moral ignorance or alienation from goodness makes human beings vulnerable to the necessities ingrained in their own nature, and how in the case of Oedipus it takes the form of an individual destiny he cannot evade.

In Plato men are represented as enslaved when they give in to what is part of their nature. We see this clearly in Homer’s depiction of the warriors in the Trojan war on both sides in the way they are deceived in their very engagement.

The book tries to bring out how in Plato self-mastery and the kind of virtue which constitutes goodness are inseparable and the sense in which the kind of

self-knowledge and moral knowledge presupposed in self-mastery are two sides of the same coin. Plato holds that self-mastery is essential for human freedom, for it takes self-mastery to resist and surmount those inclinations that belong to our nature and threaten to master us.

To yield to them is to feed the ego in us – Kant’s ‘dear self’. So to surmount them one has to detach oneself from those things in which the ego finds growth or enlargement. Furthermore such enlargement is always at the expense of other people and so promotes a disregard of their needs and welfare and hardens the heart to considerations of justice. That is why Plato sees those natural inclinations in which the ego seeks growth and enlargement as the source of evil in men.

It is in the love of what he sees as constituting goodness, Plato believes, that men turn away from and forego these inclinations. Hence he holds that men come to themselves, to goodness, to self-unity and to self-knowledge all at once, and find self-autonomy – which is another word for self-mastery. They are no longer mastered by those inclinations which confine their vision of any alternative to what they crave.

The book engages with this theme in many of its chapters and its clarification is one of its central contributions.

6 In connection with grace the book argues that what is in question is the transformation which keeping faith with God or remaining loyal to goodness affects in one independently of one’s will, but that it takes inner work to maintain such faith. This is discussed in the chapters on Augustine, Aquinas and Simone Weil. As for God’s foreknowledge in what He sees as being in store for us, the book argues that what is in question is the inescapability of an absolute moral judgement on our life – comparable with Socrates’ judgement that Archelaus *cannot* be happy whatever he does in the life he lives.

Where it comes to God’s knowledge of what will befall each individual independently of his will, the book argues in the chapters on Augustine and Aquinas that such knowledge is one with God’s will. The believer is thus enjoined to accept it unconditionally and unquestioningly. In the chapters on Spinoza and Simone Weil the book tries to clarify how it is that such acceptance is liberating.

7 With regard to (iii) the book argues that while in its scope the law of causality is limitless within the grammar in which it is applicable and makes sense, that grammar characterizes one form of discourse and the reality to which it is internally related. The concepts in terms of which we make sense of human actions and behaviour have a *different* grammar, and the notion of causality in question is not at home in it. All the same human beings are flesh-and-blood beings and *as such* they form part of the world in which the law of causality holds unrestricted sway. Hence it is in no way suspended in connection with human beings. The question, therefore, is: how does it relate to human actions?

The book discusses how our choices and actions are responsible to reasons which weigh with us as individuals and how, on the other hand, the bodily movements which they involve are conditioned by physiological processes that are subject to causality.

8 It has been said that we are free when *we ourselves* determine our choices and actions. The book argues that we do so when we are at one with or are ourselves in the considerations in accordance with which we determine our actions. By contrast it is not we ourselves who determine our choices and actions when these considerations are dictated to or imposed on us by what is external to us, by what we have not endorsed or made our own – by fashions or conventions to which we conform, needs or passions that are external to our will so that they remain dissociated from us, or when we have not come to ourselves and have no mind or will of our own.

Though we act as the kind of individual we are and our character finds expression in what we do and the way we behave, and though we owe our character to our upbringing and culture and much else that we meet in the course of our development, it does not follow that we are a ‘mere product’ of that through which we acquire our individual character. We can participate in our own development *or* we may come to be moulded by the circumstances of our life. Accordingly, we may come to a form of character in which we are ourselves or, on the opposite side, we may come to a form of character in which our autonomy is restricted.

9 Especially in connection with Schopenhauer the book argues – and this applies to Hume equally – that if ‘freedom of the will’ does not mean ‘gratuitousness of willing’, it does not follow that our will has to be determined by causes or ‘motives’ to which we are a spectator. Of course if our will is free it is still responsible to considerations – considerations which weigh with us and which are not open to choice in the course of our deliberations. But in subjecting our choices and decisions to such considerations we are ourselves; indeed we do so willingly – doing so is what we will.

10 Finally, it has been said that we have free will if we can do something different from what we in fact do. But, outside philosophy, this is said and has sense only in special circumstances, not regardless of them. As a general criterion it becomes a piece of metaphysics. Thus, for instance, where a person is under hypnotic suggestion we can say that he could not have done anything different from what he does do – what he has been asked under hypnosis to do. But to ask, ‘could he have acted otherwise?’, always suggests some abnormality; and the abnormality is abnormal only in contrast with the normal. The question, therefore, makes sense only in special circumstances and against a background of norms which our use of language takes for granted.

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It is, therefore, not surprising that all the thinkers considered in this book, whether they stress man's freedom or his subjection to some form of necessity, allow for the distinction between freedom and one form of bondage or another and recognize that each is possible in human life. Where they stress the inescapability of freedom and responsibility the question is: how then do men, in bad faith, lose their freedom, and in what sense is it up to them to regain it? When they are impressed by the necessities to which men are subject, the question is: how is it possible for men to be free despite these necessities, or within their framework?

Thus the book could be entitled 'Human Freedom in a World of Cause, Chance and Necessity'. For (i) reference to human freedom makes sense only in contrast with forms of enslavement and hence in a world in which these are possible, and (ii) it is within an order of which the individual is a small part and which is blind or indifferent to him that each of us has to find our share of the freedom of which we are capable as human beings. Sartre would have probably reversed this title: 'The Bondage of Beings who are Free in their very Mode of Existence'. But even he admits that we are only free in a situation of human life – one that exists independently of the individual's will and to which he has to have regard in making choices and acting.

We are flesh-and-blood beings. As such we are part of the material world and so are subject to its causality. We are social beings and live in a world shaped by the culture to which we belong. We owe our very modes of thinking and assessment to it. We share its form of life and activities with others who exist independently of us and who co-operate as well as oppose us. We have a history, a past and roots in that past, attachments and loyalties. And, last but not least, chance too has a part in the events that confront us in our life and often stand in our way. We do not act in a vacuum and so we cannot be free in a vacuum. Each one of us has to find his freedom, in the sense of autonomy, in a world of cause, chance and necessity.