



Meghan Griffith

Free Will

the basics



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Meghan Griffith



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FREE WILL THE BASICS

The question of whether humans are free to make their own decisions has long been contested and it continues to be a controversial topic today. *Free Will: The Basics* provides readers with a clear and accessible introduction to this central philosophical debate. It examines key questions such as:

- Does free will exist or is it an illusion?
- Is it possible to have free will if everything is determined?
- Can moral responsibility exist without free will?
- What can recent developments in science tell us about the existence of free will?

With detailed examples, a glossary of key terms, and suggestions for further study, *Free Will: The Basics* addresses the key debates without prejudice and is an essential read for anyone wishing to explore this challenging and philosophical problem.

Meghan Griffith is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Davidson College, USA. She specializes in free will and action theory.

The Basics

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“This is an absolutely wonderful introductory book on the issues surrounding the very lively debates about free will and moral responsibility. This area of philosophy has been extremely active in the last two or three decades, and Griffith presents ‘the basics’ in a clear and accessible way. The author has a gift for getting right to the heart of the issues. I highly recommend this book.”

John Martin Fischer, *University of California Riverside, USA*

“*Free Will: The Basics* is an excellent introduction to free will. Griffith’s writing is lucid and engaging. She instructively surveys the major philosophical theories, controversies, and arguments about free will while keeping in view for her readers the relevance of her important topic to their lives.”

Alfred R. Mele, *Florida State University, USA*

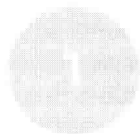
For my parents

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INTRODUCTION

As my mother always says, life is choices. Experience seems to back this up. From the time I woke up this morning, I made countless decisions: exactly when to get out of bed, whether to eat breakfast and what to eat, when to brush my teeth and so on. In my conscious life, I cannot seem to avoid making choices. Suppose I say, “I am tired of choosing all the time. I think I will just refuse to make a decision”. Paradoxically, my refusal is itself a choice I make. I can’t get out of choosing so easily. In fact, our lives are so marked by choices that some philosophers have claimed that this defines what and who we are. In other words, these philosophers say that we are beings who must constantly choose. And it could be that the choices we make determine, or at least largely shape, who we become. It is perhaps unlikely that whether I have toast or cereal for breakfast will contribute much towards shaping who I become. But of course, not all of my choices are of such a trivial nature. Sometimes I must make weighty decisions, such as whether to get married and to whom, what kind of career to embark upon, or whether to resist some sort of temptation in order to do what I think is morally right.

Because choices are such a pervasive and important part of our experience, it should come as no surprise that all sorts of thinkers and writers have chosen (!) to study the nature and significance of

choice in human life. Even those who have not formally studied or written about these issues have most likely wondered or even worried about them at one time or another. But what, exactly, might someone be worried about? One very famous, much-discussed, and central concern is referred to as the problem of free will.

THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL

What is the problem of free will? This question is probably somewhat misleading because there is not really just one problem relating to free will. There is a cluster of problems. But in general, the worry is over whether we *have* free will.

WHAT IS "FREE WILL"?

What do philosophers mean when they talk about "free will" and when they wonder whether we have it? This question is very difficult to answer, because the answer is itself a big part of the debate, as we shall see. For now, we might understand "free will" very roughly as the power to make choices, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter. Even this rough characterization might not be agreed upon by all philosophers who write about these issues, but we can use this characterization in order to see what some of the issues are. Just keep in mind that different proposed solutions to the problems of free will sometimes utilize different understandings of what free will really is.

WHY IS IT CALLED "FREE WILL"?

The term "free will" is sometimes used to distinguish the power of choosing from other kinds of freedom. For example, we often talk about political freedom, or freedom of speech. Even within discussions of the problem of free will, free will is sometimes distinguished from free *action*. The basic idea is that there might be a difference between my having an ability to choose and having an ability to carry out my choice. So, for example, perhaps I choose to have toast for breakfast, but on my way to the toaster, I am suddenly struck with paralysis so that I cannot do what I have chosen to do.

Philosophers throughout history have discussed different parts or faculties of the human mind (or soul). Sometimes the distinction is drawn between the “intellect” and the “will”. The “intellect” is the part that reasons. The “will” is the part that chooses. So while my intellect reasons to the conclusion that eating toast would be good, it is my will that must take the final step in actually *choosing* to eat toast. Philosophers continue to debate to what extent the will does or should follow what the intellect says (though few current-day philosophers would actually put it in terms of “an intellect” and “a will”). Philosophers also disagree on the other issues involved – whether the mind has separate parts or faculties, or whether it is divided in this particular way, or even whether we have minds! Some philosophers might even disagree that choosing is the same as willing. But these debates, though interesting and important, can be put aside for now. The point here is just to illustrate what is generally meant by a “will”. And for present purposes we can say that free will is some sort of ability or power to choose.

WHY IS THERE A “PROBLEM” AND WHAT IS THIS PROBLEM?

As mentioned above, the problem of free will usually centers on the possibility or probability of having free will. Can we have it? Is it likely that we do have it? We might think that it is just obvious that we do have free will. After all, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we are constantly making choices. But the worry involves the nature of these choices. We are strongly inclined to think that what we choose is “up to us”. But what if this is just an illusion? Think of a visual illusion, like a mirage. What if our experience of choosing, like a mirage, is not really what it seems to us to be?

What if, for example, I *had to* choose toast for breakfast even though it seemed to me at the time as if I could have chosen cereal? We might think it odd that I would somehow be necessitated to choose toast. What could necessitate such a choice (and presumably without my even knowing it!)? One of the main suggestions is that my choice could have been necessitated by a chain of causes.

Let us take as our starting point the fact that my choice is an event. There is a time at which I make a choice, and this is my choice-making event. What caused this event? We tend to think that my choosing toast just at that moment has some sort of

explanation and that there was something that made it happen just when it did. Often (though maybe not always) when we search for explanations, we are searching for causes. A natural way of explaining the choice is in terms of my internal states. For example, certain desires and beliefs I had at the time may have caused me to make my choice just then. I wanted to eat, I believed that by choosing toast I could fulfill this desire, I remembered that I had cereal yesterday, so I wanted something different today, and so on. So perhaps my choice is necessitated by my desires and beliefs (or by some internal event relating to these desires and beliefs).

This may not seem all that problematic – and some philosophers will argue that it is not. After all, these are *my* desires and beliefs. Why should I be worried about choosing on the basis of them? Furthermore, I am probably aware of many of these desires and beliefs, so I do not seem to be operating under any illusions. But the problem arises when we keep tracing things backwards in time. Are my desires and beliefs up to me? If they are not, it seems that ultimately my choice is not up to me either, since it is necessitated by them. To oversimplify – if my wanting toast *makes me* choose it, and it is not up to me whether I want toast, then it seems as if my choice is not really a choice after all. It's just an illusion.

But why wouldn't it be up to me whether I wanted toast? Well, in terms of experience, I think we can all relate to having desires that we feel we cannot help having. But since the worry here is that our experiences might not be accurate guides to reality, let us look to other considerations. These considerations are similar to those already discussed. It seems that my coming to have certain desires and beliefs was caused and therefore necessitated by something. I do not have the desires and beliefs I have just out of the blue – do I? We tend to think there is a complex story involving my genetic make-up and all the things that have happened to me throughout my life so far. Perhaps I am predisposed to like toast because my parents like toast. And throughout my life, I have had enough opportunities to eat toast to realize that I like it. Maybe these and other factors combine to ensure that I will want toast just when I do (and that I will therefore choose it). On the picture we are discussing, we can look at these factors as playing out in terms of events of cause and effect. But for the most part, these factors are not up to me. Even if some of them are, they may have causes that

are not. And those causes have causes. So eventually, we could theoretically trace a causal chain to a time before I was born, a time when surely nothing was up to me. If each event necessitates the next one in the chain, then my choosing toast was actually something that had to happen right when it did. The illusion is that I think it is up to me whether to choose toast, but really this was established before I was even born!

This is one facet of the problem of free will. The worry is that although I feel as if my choices are up to me, they are really already laid out by things that happened before – things that are not up to me at all. Roughly speaking, the idea that from any point in time the whole future is fixed – that is, that events can only unfold in exactly one way – is called **determinism**. Determinism is often characterized in terms of causes, but not always. For now, it is enough to say that in general, philosophers often worry that determinism would rule out the possibility of genuine free will.

But maybe we were wrong to suppose that my choices are caused like this. Perhaps they are spontaneous and do not come about as the result of prior events. So, for instance, the choice of toast isn't caused by anything at all. Or, perhaps my choices are caused by prior events, but these prior causal events do not necessitate what they cause. Maybe causes just influence the likelihood of their effects. For example, maybe my desire for toast causes my choice in the sense of influencing it without necessitating it. Maybe it just makes it more likely that toast will be chosen. Both of these solutions have been proposed by notable philosophers and we will talk about them in some detail later on.

Right now, we must consider another facet of the problem of free will that comes up as a result of considering the suggestions just mentioned. The worry on this side of the problem is that our choices become random or arbitrary in a troublesome way. Take first the suggestion that my choice is not caused at all. If that is true, it seems that the choice just pops into my head from nowhere. How is such an event something that is “up to me”? If my choice is not caused, we are inclined to think that nothing can explain why I chose the way I did. Philosophers worry about whether such seeming randomness deserves to be called “free will”. After all, free will is supposed to denote some sort of power of choice. According to many (though certainly not all) philosophers, uncaused choices

cannot really be choices. The idea is that they are not within our control since they supposedly come out of nowhere. In some senses, such “choices” seem to have nothing to do with us, since they don’t flow *causally* from our thoughts and desires.

It is perhaps a more complicated matter to discuss the arguments against the second suggestion (that our choices are caused but not necessitated). We can save this for a later chapter. Suffice it to say that the worries about this second proposal are similar, but not identical, to those just discussed concerning the first. Some philosophers argue that there is still a troubling lack of control, even in spite of the claim that such choices are causally influenced by our beliefs and desires (since they are not wholly uncaused).

The above discussion is meant to show why the idea of free will is problematic. It is threatened by determinism, but it is also threatened from the other side (if we take determinism away). Although I have mentioned some proposed solutions very briefly, there is much more to be said about these solutions. There are also plenty of other proposals to consider. The above is just meant to illustrate the nature of the problem. Different kinds of solutions have been proposed throughout the history of philosophy. Solutions are still being proposed today. It might come as a surprise that many of the solutions say that we can have free will even if all our choices are necessitated! This kind of view is generally called **compatibilism**. It may be interesting to note that some (but not all) compatibilists even say that having our choices necessitated is the *only* way we can have free will.

At this point, if you are confused or wondering how the problem of free will could possibly be solved, you are in good company. Sometimes the problem of free will is said to be the most difficult of the major philosophical problems. Lots of solutions have been proposed, but as we will see, none of the proposals avoids serious objections.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The difficulty of the problem of free will is good for professional philosophers – it will keep many of them employed for some time to come. But does it matter outside the small world of philosophical research? Maybe it is just an interesting intellectual puzzle with no real importance in our lives. I do not think so. There are important

reasons why someone might care, even beyond the world of academic philosophy.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Though the two do not always overlap, free will is closely linked to **moral responsibility**. Many philosophers think that if there were no free will, there could be no moral responsibility. And many believe that if something was not done out of free will, the person who did it cannot be held morally responsible for it (there are some qualifications to this which will be discussed later). To say that someone is morally responsible is generally to say that he is praiseworthy or blameworthy for something he has done.

It is fairly natural for us to link free will and moral responsibility. And the prevalence and importance of doing so goes well beyond the walls of the university. The easiest way to see this is to consider certain kinds of legal cases. Legal responsibility is not exactly the same as moral responsibility, but since legal responsibility is often based on intuitions about moral responsibility, these examples can be used to get at the intuitiveness of linking free will and moral responsibility.

When someone is put on trial for a crime, the defendant is represented by an attorney or team of attorneys. These defense lawyers attempt various strategies on behalf of their client. Sometimes they attempt to cast reasonable doubt on the defendant's guilt. But it has become increasingly common for the defense to offer reasons that the defendant should not be held responsible, even though there is no doubt that the defendant performed the act in question. In other words, the defense says that its client is not to blame, even though she clearly committed the crime. For example, the defense might claim that their client should not be punished because some brain abnormality or medical condition necessitated her behavior and took away her free will. The idea is that we think it unfair to blame (and punish) someone if her choice or action was not up to her. We might remove her from society to protect others, but to the extent that we believe that she could not help what she did, we also tend to think that she should not be blamed. Obviously, philosophers do not agree on what constitutes free will, nor do they always agree on the relationship between free will and responsibility. This means