

Some Dilemmas Concerning the Notion of Free will

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“There is a disputation [that will continue] till mankind are raised from the dead between the Necessitarians and the partisans of Free Will.” --- Jalalu’ddin Rumi; in “Mathnawi”.¹

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Abstract: As we know, there is a difference between a simple *wish* and the *will* of an individual. Not only a concrete action is required in order to alleviate the impact of various factors that inhibit the former before it becomes ‘will’, but also a deep level of human consciousness. It implies conscientious motivation, clear goals, etc.

My paper introduces some of the elements instrumental in the leap from the *wish* to the human *will*.

As the issue of Free Will is central to the paper because when I say ‘human will’ I refer to ‘free will’, I need to mention that my perspective on this notion is pragmatic. I. e. I understand that even though any decision we make is conditioned by various factors, we do not think of this state of affair when we carry out our activities – at least not always. Because of that we feel free – free enough to be able to function according to social norms.

1. INTRODUCTION

In her book *She came to stay*, Simone de Beauvoir flags out a situation in which the volitional agent finds himself or herself very often: “‘Let’s assume you’ve decided to go to a concert,’ NB [said Pierre]. ‘Just as you’re about to set out, the idea of walking or taking the métro there strikes you as unbearable. So you convince yourself that you are free as regards your previous decision, and you stay at home. That’s all very well, but when ten minutes later you find yourself sitting in an armchair, bored stiff, you are no longer in the least free. You’re simply suffering the consequences of your own act.’”²

1.1. The Factors Involved in the Leap from Wish to Human will

The fragment above illustrates one of the dilemmas we have to face when discussing the notion of free will: if it is possible for a human being to be certain that he/she obtains maximum satisfaction by choosing a particular course of action from among many, in other words, if they exercise their free will to the maximum. Since I announced in the Abstract of the paper that my position concerning the notion of Free will is pragmatic, my realistic answer to this question is as follows: there is no such guarantee and the volitional agent needs to take a risk when carrying out an act based on any choice he or she makes. Nevertheless, despite this, human beings function by making decisions according to what they perceive as being their own will, a free will.

¹ Jalalu’ddin Rumi (1207-1273). The poem “Mathnawi”, *Masnawi-i ma’navi (Collection of poems)*, book 6, was written in the thirteenth-century. A famous published edition is that from 1461. The quotation here is from Rumi, *Collection of poems*, translation Reynold A. Nicholson, vol. 6; the latter volume only contains books 6 and 7. The fragment was cited in the book by Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 3.

² Simone de Beauvoir, the book *She came to stay*, Fontana/Collins, Editions Gallimard, 1943; in Great Britain William Collins Sons & Co Ltd Glasgow, p. 51.

But what are the processes involved in the manifestation of free will?

a) Obviously, the basic one consists in the transformation of a simple wish (which I consider an impulse) in something more complex that involves human consciousness and constitutes a stronger trigger for human action than a wish does. William James (1842 –1910; still very actual since so many editions of his work are been issued) thinks that the leap from a human wish to an act of human will is *in nuce* “the data for an entire psychology of volition.”³

b) Other factors involved in the manifestation of human free will – in a positive way – are motivation, purpose, and emotions. There are many others, but in this paper I will refer to these three. Among the causes that inhibit the process of a wish becoming human will and which the above-mentioned factors work against are, for instance, the opposition from other people, our own laziness, the fear of getting out of our comfort zone, etc.; nevertheless, motivation, emotions, and purpose annul the inhibitory force of those, and free will and human acts performed in accordance to it ensue. In James’s word: “The moment [the] inhibitory ideas ceased, the original idea exerted its effects.”⁴ Recent research indicates what part of our brain is in charge of the human will carrying out its ‘objectives’. For instance, Walter Henrik affirms that what “functions” for ‘willed action’ is the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex.⁵ He further explains that the right inferior parietal cortex and the anterior cingulate gyrus⁶ have a crucial role in “the representation of a body-self during willed actions.”⁷ The detailed results of his work are convincing. It is known that the cingulate **is accountable for human emotions**; it is involved in linking reward and punishment information to behaviour (hence is connected with motivation), and specifically, to action in the sense that it regulates human comportment.⁸ The philosopher from Berlin indicates that “it is likely” that the anterior cingulate “plays a part in the behavior of striving, which Kane (1996a)⁹ says is a form of the will (and O’Shaughnessy 1980¹⁰ calls the striving will)”.¹¹ Henrik’s explanation concerning the neurophysiology in charge of free will ties up with and confirms – adding detailed scientific and ‘technical’ data to its initial findings – James’s position, which maintains that because this [the free will] is ‘a state of mind’, it produces changes in consciousness that in turn makes the body ‘reverberate’. James says that every change in consciousness, ‘however slight’ has this effect (has an impact on the body).¹² Henrik also speak about the role of human emotions in the triggering of free will’s manifestation. He states that “We cannot do without them [the emotions] when making authentic and prudent decisions with implications for our own futures.”¹³ He considers that the view according to which feelings “obstruct reflective and responsible decision making is not true. Emotions actually constitute a foundation for our subjective values.”¹⁴ I agree with him and consider that it is obvious that a human **desire** or **wish**, as an emotion, is also a stimulus for human **will**; other emotions playing a similar role are joy, anticipation of good results in a specific endeavour, etc. Henrik emphasizes that the decisions we take are supported by

³ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Cambridge Massachusetts; London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1981, 1983; p. 1133. To source some of my thoughts in the paper I used the latest edition – that from 1983, p. 1133.

⁴ W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 1133.

⁵ Walter Henrik, “Neurophilosophy of Free Will”, in Robert Kane (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 572 [pp. 565-576].

⁶ The cingulate is a component of the limbic system. The limbic system, also known as the paleomammalian cortex, is a set of brain structures located on both sides of the thalamus, immediately beneath the medial temporal lobe of the cerebrum, primarily in the forebrain; it is buried under the cerebral cortex (the cortex is the outermost part of the brain). The components of the limbic system such as the hippocampus and amygdala serve or support many functions within the body, including emotion, behaviour, long-term memory, and olfaction. The limbic system’s functions are especially obvious when it comes to behaviour we need for survival: feeding, reproduction and caring for our young, as well as fight or flight responses.

⁷ W. Henrik, “Neurophilosophy of Free Will”, p. 573.

⁸ Henrik, “Neurophilosophy of Free Will”, p. 568.

⁹ Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

¹⁰ Brian O’Shaughnessy, *The Will: A Dual Aspect Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980, vols. 1-2.

¹¹ Henrik, “Neurophilosophy of Free Will”, p. 568.

¹² James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 1066.

¹³ Henrik, “Neurophilosophy of Free Will”, p. 573.

¹⁴ Ibid.

insights and the feeling that they are “right”; it means that they are in the interest of the volitional agent and consistent with his/her “emotional values”;¹⁵ needless to underline the relevance of Henrik’s observation when discussing **free will**. Yet, Henrik himself prefers to replace that notion with what he calls “**natural autonomy**”,¹⁶ which he describes in summary thus: “We possess natural autonomy when under very similar circumstances we could also do other than we actually do (because of the chaotic nature of our brain), and this choice is understandable (intelligible; it is determined by past events, by immediate adaptation processes in the brain, and partially by our linguistically formed environment), and is authentic (when through reflection loops with emotional adjustments we can identify with that action). This kind of autonomy suits a compatibilistic concept of responsibility and supplements it in some areas.”¹⁷ I do not think that by providing this definition, Henrik solved the problem of free will; a large part of his account –sometimes with the same words, sometimes with slightly different ones– is found in the texts of philosophers who dedicated all their professional life to the study of free will.

The motivation, the goals, and the emotions that we mentioned above when speaking about what is instrumental in human will’s expression are aspects of human consciousness; in my opinion, **they constitute the dynamic manifestation of it**. So are representation and planning, which the process of decision making requires and that Henrik discusses about; for the latter those are the product of a “selective adaptation process”; he states that, but at the same time he considers representations to be also generated by chance.¹⁸

To conclude this section of the paper we have to reiterate that the chief factors in the leap from wish to human will are motives, emotions, and purpose.

2. HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

Another aspect connected with the notion of Free will, or rather a different formulation concerning the quandary of its existence, which I think is important to refer to, is the answer to the following question: to what extent the human beings can really exercise free will if they cannot foresee all the consequences of their actions? Philosophers have conversed at length about this issue when analyzing the relationship between **free will and human responsibility**. They query is whether the agent can be completely responsible since the state of affairs is such (that it is impossible to predict everything is our lives). To this, Robert Kane answers that the existence of indeterminism ultimately makes people always responsible, whatever they do; he argues that the volitional agents have plural voluntary control over various option from among they chose without being compelled in any way.¹⁹ I think that is true when we are clearly faced with choices between right and wrong; however, our options for a particular course of action do not always belong so clearly to these two moral values, as it was the case with the example from Simone de Beauvoir’s book I provided at the beginning of my paper. As Derk Pereboom points out, the type of indeterminism Kane proposes cannot in fact ‘enhance’ people’s control that, “according to Kane himself moral responsibility demands.”²⁰ Laura Waddell Ekstrom formulates the relationship between free will and moral responsibility in the framework of determinism. She states that determinism “rules out available alternatives to every choice and action”, hence moral responsibility entails the falsity of determinism. In Waddell Ekstrom’s words, “[O]ne’s being morally responsible for an action is inconsistent with a complete lack of available alternatives to choice and action at every point in one’s life.”²¹

In my opinion that means that, actually, there are situations in which humans cannot be responsible for all their undertakings since they do not always have the complete information about an action they want to initiate or a decision to make. Hence, the position I adopt on the relationship between Free

¹⁵ Henrik, “Neurophilosophy of Free Will”, p. 571.

¹⁶ Henrik, “Neurophilosophy of Free Will”, pp. 574-575.

¹⁷ Henrik, “Neurophilosophy of Free Will”, p. 575.

¹⁸ Henrik, “Neurophilosophy of Free Will”, p. 570.

¹⁹ R. Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, especially chapter 6 [pp. 90-101].

²⁰ Derk Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 52; see also p. 51; 53-55.

²¹ Laura Waddell Ekstrom, “Libertarianism and Frankfurt-style cases”, in R. Kane (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, p. 315 [pp. 309-322].

will and responsibility is that known as ‘moral lack’. But I moderate it by stating that we can speak **about degrees** of responsibility; these correlate with the quantity of information a person has before making a decision. One of the implications of this position is that, in instances in which someone breaks the law, each of the deliberated cases needs to be considered individually. And this is, in fact, what happens in reality within any society. The circumstances in which the agent acts are taken into consideration; obviously a war prisoner cannot exert his free will to the extent a university professor can, for example. In the context of this discussion we can remind the readers that Immanuel Kant considered that free will and the moral law requires one another (this is one of the Categorical imperatives); he elaborated at length on the connection between the two concepts.

The conclusion to the second part of my paper is that human responsibility should be conceived in terms of various degrees.

2.1. About the Relationship between the Definition of Human Freedom and that of Free will

Moving now to another idea about the freedom of the will, one might query in which way the manner of defining ‘freedom’ illuminates the discussion about this concept (?). There are, as we know, many ways to describe human freedom; we have one designation of it within any major philosophical theory. Among those let’s analyze the legalistic perspective, and also that of intellectual history. If so, to consider the first, we should remind ourselves that one of the traditional views on this subject-matter is that someone has freedom as long as his/her action do not impinge negatively on the freedom of another person. A more contemporary definition of this notion is that someone is free as long as he/she respects the social norms that regulate a society. While that is true, an argument can be made that in such situations creativity suffers. How can progress be made if everything is strictly regulated? Certainly, in the intellectual history, our second standpoint, that is not possible – and not even desirable. This history is interspersed with scientific ‘revolutions’ and scientific paradigms succeed one another. The answer to the dilemma whether our exploits are regulated or free is that there is a dialectic at play in human history which can be formulated thus: an underlining ‘guidance’ exists on which what is felt like free creative processes develops. (One very suggestive example is the situation in music: while the rules of consistence of style are kept, a variety of musical genres exist and co-exist). Within this framework one can say that human will is free to manifest itself.

The summary of my position on the notion of free will – a pragmatic one– is as follows: being aware [and well informed about what quantum physics tells us] that any decision we make is conditioned by other realities, however loose their connection with the volitional agent is, the human will is free. Subjectively, it is felt so: we have preferences, we follow individual purposes, have unique emotions, etc. I. e. when we follow our pursuits we do not think of all the factors involved in these – at least not always. Because of that we **feel free** – free enough to be able to function according to social conventions, to be entitled to dignity, and to say that we do things ‘on our own’ as both individuals and societies. I also conclude that human beings cannot always be completely responsible for their actions.

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Citation: Prof. Dr. Elena Ene Draghici-Vasilescu. "Some Dilemmas Concerning the Notion of Free will" *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 10, no. 6, 2023, pp. 25-29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.1006003>.

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