

HOW FREE IS OUR FREE WILL?¹

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The notion that we have free will, free will to make choices to act in certain ways and to refrain from acting in others, is central to our understanding of what it is to be human. Our free will is so important to how we see ourselves that it was considered to be perhaps God's greatest gift to us in the Garden of Eden. It is what sets us apart from other animals. It ennobles us, and it gives us a sense of control over our lives. It gives us our sense of responsibility and, of course, it is the basis of our legal system, with its notion of 'just and fair punishment' for crimes committed.

So 'free will' is a core belief about ourselves that goes to the very heart of our belief systems - and it is so widely and so strongly held that it has, I would suggest, attained the status of a given 'fact', a fact that is so self-evidently true that it couldn't possibly be mistaken.

So why am I attempting to challenge this fundamental and much treasured belief today? Why will I be arguing that although our free will undoubtedly *feels* free (and mine certainly does) it is actually not 'free' at all? Well, it's not for the sake of having yet another academic debate about this millennia old question, as undoubtedly fascinating as that might be. Indeed, I must admit to feeling some trepidation about presenting this side of the debate at all as I have found that people can respond very emotionally and negatively to the suggestion that their free will might be illusory. But apart from the fact that I believe it to be the truth, the 'free will is an illusion' position does have profound implications for how we regard other people, and indeed ourselves, and for how we respond and behave towards one another - how we 'walk over the world' - and it is for this reason that I am speaking my truth as I see it.

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The problem with free will is that the ennobling side, the notion that we are moral creatures who can freely choose how we act and who can control our own destiny comes with a devastating flip side – judgement, judgement of others and judgement of ourselves. And with judgement comes blame. Because inherent in the notion of ‘choice’ is the notion that we *could have done otherwise* – so whatever the extenuating circumstances we must take at least *some* responsibility for the bad choices we make, *some* blame. Also inherent in the notion of free will is the notion that there are some other people who, in exactly the same situation as you, would have done better – so you’ve somehow fallen short, you’ve failed, you’re guilty. And of course in many religious circles if your failure is a more serious breach of the group’s moral code then you will be deemed to have sinned, and may even need redemption from an outside source to save you from an eternal punishment.

It is the *could have done otherwise* that is the big problem because it erodes our compassion for other people, and indeed our compassion for ourselves, because it carries the implication “He could have chosen a different course of action, but chose not to - so he brought the consequences and suffering on himself, and so he should deal with them himself”. And of course one sees this sentiment in an extreme form in the teaching of the ‘fairness’ and ‘rightness’ of eternal suffering in hell for wrong choices made during life.

The *could have done otherwise* requirement of free will, a requirement that is *necessary* in order for free will to operate, also seriously undermines our Quaker testament to equality, a testament that is a fundamental keystone for our other testaments. Because if you could have done otherwise, if someone else in exactly the same situation as you *would* have chosen to behave in a better (or worse) way, then how can you say you are ‘equal’? Clearly, you’re not. In these circumstances, then, equality is an ideal we would *like* to be true, but isn’t. However, if my argument that our free will is illusory is correct, then it follows necessarily that equality and our testament to equality is not just an ideal but rather is a fundamental fact of life.

Surface of deep levels of explanation

Before I go any further I would like to introduce the notion of different levels of explanation, and make a distinction between the immediate *surface* level explanation and the more fundamental, *deep* level.

Let me illustrate what I mean here with an example. You are standing by the kerb waiting to cross the road. A car veers onto the pavement, knocks you down and, after a painful 6 months in hospital, you are left paralysed from the waist down. How do you feel about the driver? There are two scenarios, in the first you learn that the driver had a heart attack, entirely out of the blue, and in the second the driver was drunk.

I am assuming that, like me, you will feel more negative about the driver if you discover that he was drunk when he mowed you down than if you discover it was the result of a heart attack. With the heart attack case, it is easy to see that you were both victims, victims of a situation beyond anyone's control, but in the second case your suffering has been caused directly by the choices made by the driver. He has free will so he could have acted otherwise; he knows it's wrong to drink and drive; he ought not to have driven whilst drunk. And indeed the Law would make a similar clear distinction between these two situations. And even though you may be able to find it in your heart to forgive him (and generally that will be much easier if he expresses regret and remorse for what he has done) both you and he will be left feeling that he is to blame for your horrific injuries, that he did something wrong, and that he 'needs' your forgiveness.

Obviously, at one level, both drivers were 'responsible' for your accident since they were both in charge of their car when it crashed into you. But if you delve below the surface, to the reasons behind the accident, then only the drunk driver appears culpable. I will be arguing that if you delve deeper still, to the reasons behind the reasons, then at the deepest level the drunk driver isn't culpable either - that here, too, you are both victims of a situation which was not, ultimately, under anyone's control. But this argument rests on

the argument that at this deep level our 'free will' is not as 'free' as we think it is; indeed, it is not 'free' at all.

What can psychology add to the debate?

As I see it, there are two main strands of evidence from the field of psychology relevant to this debate, the first coming from clinical practice, where the subject of study is individual humans living their highly complex lives in the highly complex real world, and the second from laboratory studies of brain functioning, where typically the task studied is very simple and strictly controlled and measured.

Evidence from clinical psychology

Since free will is, essentially, a psychological function, and clearly one that has a massive impact on people's lives, it would not be unreasonable to expect clinical psychology to have a lot to say about it. It is perhaps somewhat disappointing, then, to find that free will is not a hot topic for debate amongst clinical psychologists. Disappointing, but not surprising. For most people working with a therapist a belief that they can change the future for the better, through their own efforts, is an essential motivator to keep them engaged in what can often be a quite difficult process. So as therapists we would seek to support this 'functional' belief whatever our personal views on the issue. But I suspect that an even more telling reason for the lack of clinical studies of free will is that the vast majority of clinical psychologists, like everyone else, just accept free will as a self-evident fact of life and so have never seriously thought to question it.

A cognitive behavioural model for making choices

situation → interpretation → thoughts & emotions → possible responses generated & considered; choice made → action

The above is a simplified model of what happens when we make a choice about how to respond to the situation we are in. A number of factors influence each stage of this process and I will consider these

in some detail to see where, if anywhere, we need to include a separate 'free will' factor in order to explain the choice made and action taken.

Beliefs, knowledge, memories of past situations

The way we interpret the situation we are in is determined by the beliefs and knowledge we have acquired over our lifetime, as a result of our own personal experience and indirectly from other people, i.e. from everything we have ever seen, heard, felt, read about, etc. And our belief/knowledge/memory system is also critical in determining the thoughts and emotions that this interpretation triggers, the options for action that come to mind and how these options are evaluated and decided.

Our belief/knowledge system is a very powerful factor that affects everything we do. Indeed, however rational and unbiased we try to be, there is absolutely no way that we can separate ourselves from the distorting lens of our underlying belief system and our previous life's experiences. It is a fundamental part of who we are and how we function.

Biological drives and instincts

Although other factors may ultimately determine the response we make in a particular situation, we should not underestimate the importance of our biological drives and instincts in our everyday life. In the above model this factor would constitute one aspect of the total situation that we are in, and it would also influence our thoughts and emotions and the responses that we make. An easy illustration of these effects is to consider a plate of your favourite food and your different responses to that if you are (a) hungry or (b) sated.

The occurrence of these animal drives and instincts is biologically determined and as such the notion of free will does not apply to this factor.

Personality

Another important factor in how we evaluate situations and how we respond to them is our personality. Now this appears to be the most likely candidate for free will in this psychological model, so I am going to unpick this factor in a bit more detail. Certainly in everyday life our judgements of people are usually judgements of some personality feature that we dislike or like – she's unkind, she's lazy, she's generous, sympathetic, etc. So where does our personality come from, what is it determined and influenced by? How much responsibility (if any) do we have for our own personality?

(i) The body and brain we were born with

Our personality is undoubtedly affected by the body and particularly the brain that we were born with, and its subsequent development.

Studies of genetically identical twins who have been reared apart are commonly used to see what relative effects environment and genetic factors have in determining some characteristic. In the case of personality, studies have shown that identical twins can grow up to have remarkably similar personalities despite having been nurtured in quite different households, demonstrating that the brain/body we are born with is an important factor in determining our personality.

We can also see the importance of the brain for our personality when we look at the effect that brain damage can have. For example, one of the very difficult aspects for relatives of people who survive severe road traffic accidents is that the personality of the victim may change significantly, e.g. a previously loving and thoughtful relative may become uncaring, unkind and superficial after their accident.

Diseases of the brain can also dramatically affect personality. For example, a formerly kind, socially responsible person who develops Pick's Disease, a form of dementia that hits the frontal areas of the brain particularly hard, may be rendered sexually inappropriate and prone to violent outbursts and behaviour that are so severe that s/he can only be cared for in a special secure unit.

At the other end of life, it is also known that babies who suffer brain damage during a difficult birth are more likely to have difficulty with anger and anger control throughout their lives.

We can also observe temporary changes in personality caused by temporary physical changes to the body and brain such as severe pain, and food and water deprivation. And most women will be only too familiar with the way they can change at certain times of the menstrual cycle, typically becoming more irritable and impatient for a few days. So which is the 'real' you – the calm, thoughtful one or the irritable, snappy one?

Substance abuse can also affect personality. The potentially devastating effects on personality and behaviour of substances such as alcohol, drugs and steroids are only too well known.

(ii) Our upbringing and environment

Our personality is also affected by the type of upbringing we have had, and the environment in which that took place. To give a few examples:

In our earliest years we develop our core beliefs about our self, about others and about the world around us, what are sometimes called our underlying *schema*. For example, depending on our early experiences we develop beliefs that we are loveable or unlovable, powerful or powerless, good or bad, worthy or unworthy, etc. and beliefs that others are trustworthy or untrustworthy, helpful or unhelpful, loving or unloving, forgiving or unforgiving, etc. These core beliefs have profound effects on how we operate in the world and how we interact with other people, and these in turn affect our subsequent life experiences. One of the characteristics of beliefs, especially these deep seated beliefs that are so fundamental to our personality, is that they tend to reinforce themselves and, once established, are very resistant to change.

Our upbringing and environment also play critical roles in the development of our moral code and the strictness with which we adhere to that code. And as we grow up our experiences and the people around us shape within us an interior model of an 'ideal self'.

This is the image we have of how we would like to be, how we like to see ourselves, and it can be a very important factor in determining how we act and the choices that we make.

(iii) The interaction between our brain/body and our life's experiences

But of course neither the brain/body nor the effects of the environment/experiences act independently, what we see is always some interaction between these factors. I'll give you just a couple of examples to illustrate this point.

First, we know that the ability to feel someone else's distress, to be able to put oneself in someone else's shoes, varies significantly from person to person, and the evidence indicates that this difference is due largely to differences in the brain. So called 'psychopathic' personalities are largely self-absorbed and lack the ability to empathise with others and, in extreme forms, can treat others as no more important than objects, to be used or abused as suits their needs. Lacking even rudimentary empathy horrific crimes can be committed without remorse, the only regret being if caught. But we know that genetic factors are implicated in psychopathy, and that in the worst, antisocial cases, brain scans regularly show a lack of grey matter in the frontal area of the brain used for analysing other people's emotions and feelings. So to what extent can we blame someone for not behaving as we would when they don't have the same sort of brains and sensitivities to suffering that we do? We don't hesitate to cut up vegetables and put them in boiling water because we have no sense of them suffering – but supposing we're wrong?

But interestingly, and importantly, upbringing and environment can have a significant effect on outcome even where the biological differences are marked. For example, whilst some people with a 'psychopathic' type brain and genetic pattern develop antisocial personalities whose behaviour is only restrained by the fear of punishment, others, brought up in caring, socially aware families, can learn at an intellectual level about other people's feelings and the socially advantageous ways of responding to them.

But without that automatic feeling for others that most of us are lucky enough to be born with, and just take for granted, it is never an easy task.

Some people are born with a greater propensity for strong emotions than others, and I have already argued for the importance of the brain in dealing with strong emotions when they arise, as illustrated by the adverse effects of neonatal brain damage on the child's ability to control his anger in later life. But ability to control emotion is also significantly affected by features of the child's upbringing, such as the way the significant others around him express their emotions, how they respond to one another's emotional expressions, how they react to the child's frustrations and expressions of emotion, and whether the child is taught how to self-soothe and self-calm.

Nothing surprising here, but what is perhaps surprising is that these early learning experiences have beneficial and permanent effects on the child's brain, encouraging rich neuronal connections to be made within the frontal lobes. But these connections have to be made before the child is 6 or so years of age; if you miss out on this early window of opportunity it is very much harder to learn to control emotions later in life. So is it fair to blame someone who, for example, has difficulty controlling her temper if the advantageous connections in her brain have never been made?

The findings from clinical psychology clearly challenge the notion that we might be 'responsible' for our own personality. Rather, they indicate that our personalities are the result of the effects of our life's experiences interacting with and on the body and brain we were born with – we cannot just 'choose' to have a different personality.

And in case you have any residual doubts I'm going to set you a challenge to take away with you. What aspect(s) of your own personality do you think you might be responsible for? And if you think you've found one - are you *sure* it can't be explained in terms of the way you were born and/or your life's experiences since then? And if you think it can't, then how would you explain it?

Free will and the cognitive behavioural model for making choices

So if we come back to the purpose of this exercise, which was to look for the key factors involved in making a 'free will' choice, we find that the ultimate explanations come down to nature and nurture, to the effects of our life's experiences on the brain/body we were born with. There is no need for an additional 'free will' factor to account for the decisions we make.

Now you may well be thinking at this point "But we can choose our life experiences" – and that is undoubtedly true – but I would then want to ask "But why did you choose that *particular* life experience, rather than another possible alternative?" – and then you're back on the same inquisitorial path, looking for the root causes of your choosing this *particular* situation or course of action, rather than one of the alternatives - and that will lead you back to the core explanations in terms of your beliefs, values, personality, etc., etc. and ultimately to the same end point explanations of 'nature' and 'nurture'.

The spiritual factor

But where does the spiritual side of our nature fit in to this model? And could free will come in here? It may not surprise you to hear that the spiritual aspect of our being does not feature specifically in mainstream psychological models. But it is not difficult to put it in.

First, awareness of the spiritual other adds to and changes the situation that we are in.

Second, during our lifetime our direct, personal experiences of the spiritual other and our indirect learning from other people's experiences and views will result in the development of a set of beliefs, knowledge and memories about religious and spiritual matters. These will affect the way we interpret the situation we are in, the thoughts and emotions that this generates, and the ideas about possible actions we could take, in the same way that our other beliefs do. And like our other beliefs, our spiritual beliefs may also play a part in determining which of our possible responses is selected.

Third, awareness of the 'spiritual other' and the spiritual practices we may engage in will also influence the choices we make through the effects they will have on our personality.

If awareness of a 'spiritual other' influences the choices we make, is there room for a 'free will' factor here? Can we choose whether we have these experiences and whether we attend to them? As far as awareness is concerned, either everyone has equal access to and awareness of things spiritual or some people are more aware than others. Personally, I think that some people's brains are innately more sensitive to the 'spiritual' aspect than others, but whichever of these options you go for neither implies that this is something that we can claim personal responsibility for or that we can switch on or off according to our will. We can, of course, apparently make a 'free will' choice of whether or not to attend to and develop these experiences, but here again if one asks the question 'Why at this *particular* time are you choosing to engage (or not) with your spiritual experiences?' then as before the core underlying reasons will come down to the effects of nature and life's experiences.

So although the spiritual aspect of life can be seen as a powerful and pervasive factor influencing how we think, feel, believe and act, like the other factors in the standard psychological model it appears ultimately to be a matter of luck how powerful that factor is and what influence it has in us as individuals, luck in the brain we were born with and luck in the opportunities we had subsequently to develop it.

Uncovering the deep level explanations

In clinical practice, trying to understand why the person has developed the unwanted behaviours, beliefs, fears etc. that they are bringing to the therapist is a key part of the therapy because this enables the therapy to be targeted at the factors underpinning and maintaining the unwanted 'complaint'. One way of doing this is to keep asking 'why?' to elicit a chain of explanations going down to the root causes. For example, if seeking the underlying factors for a

piece of behaviour you would ask 'Why did you do X?' 'Because Y'. 'Why Y?' 'Because Z'. 'Why Z?' etc. etc.

This can be a very interesting and revealing exercise to do, so I would urge you all to have a go at it yourselves some time. It's probably easiest to work on something you've done yourself, though I do suggest that you start with something you don't feel too emotional about because although it's with things that provoke strong emotional reactions that this sort of self-enquiry can be most helpful, it's also where it's hardest to do because there's likely to be more resistance. And when you've tried this exercise on yourself, have a go with someone else's actions. You'll probably have to do a lot of speculating if the person themselves is not engaged on this exercise with you since you may have relatively little knowledge about their past experiences, beliefs, feelings etc., but the very act of trying to look for possible explanations can be a very helpful exercise in compassionate understanding.

What often happens when you do this exercise is that you'll end up with something like: "he did it because he was lazy", or "because he is bad", or "I did it because I was in a bad mood", etc. *But these types of labels are descriptions, surface level explanations – they are not final, deep level explanations.* So you have to press on with the 'why?' question. "But why is he lazy?", "why is he bad?", or "why was I in a bad mood".

And if you do this exercise, trying to find possible explanations for every 'don't know' you come up against, you will find that you end up with two 'deep' factors that you just can't go beyond - the effects of the way the person was born and their subsequent life's experiences.

'Free will' – an unnecessary and superfluous factor

Although in practice we cannot possibly know all the factors that have ever affected one particular person's life, I think it is reasonable to conclude from these findings that *in principle* it is possible to completely understand and account for why someone has done what they have done in terms of their 'nature' and 'nurture'. No separate

self, making arbitrary decisions that are independent of the influences of biological make up and life's experiences, is necessary to explain that behaviour.

Our experience of free will

But the feeling of having free will is very convincing - very, very convincing - so what is happening when we feel as if we are asserting our free will and choosing which action to take?

Actions that are psychologically cf physically possible

Before looking at what is involved, I think it might be helpful to draw the distinction between actions that are physically possible and actions that are psychologically possible, because I think we tend (wrongly) to think of free will as applying whenever the options are physically possible. Despite the fact that deciding whether or not to act is a psychological process and not a physical one, no regard is given to whether the options are *psychologically* possible.

Let me give an example to illustrate the point. Supposing I put a very sharp knife in front of me and invite one of the audience to come up and assist me in an experiment. A woman volunteers and comes up to the lectern. I ask the volunteer to pick up the knife and slash my face with it. Now if her hands are tied behind her back we would all agree that she has no free will as to whether or not she accedes to my request. But supposing her hands are not restricted. This appears to be a situation where she can assert her free will - to slash or not to slash. But how likely is it that she will slash my face? The likelihood, I suggest, is absolute zero: with her personality, beliefs etc. she could no more accede to my request to slash my face than she could if her hands were tied behind her back. So where is the 'free will' in that decision? And if we can see in this extreme example how psychological factors override any 'free will' factor, might it be that these same factors are also determining the outcome in less extreme cases? Which brings us back to our earlier question: What *is* happening when we experience the feeling of asserting our free will and choosing how we act?

The beam balance analogy

I am going to use the analogy of the beam balance to illustrate what is happening when we decide between two options.

The advantages and disadvantages of each of the options come into our mind and are weighed up (NB. Not all these come into conscious awareness, many will be operating at an unconscious level) and our conscious awareness of that process taking place is what we experience as our free will in action. And why do these particular advantages and disadvantages come to mind? Where do they come from? Well, as we have already seen, the options and our thoughts and feelings about those options come from our past experiences, beliefs, emotions, biological needs, etc., etc.

Let's see how this might work in practice, using the beam balance analogy. In the example I used just now of asking a volunteer to slash my face, her belief that violence is wrong and her empathy for my suffering would weight one side of the balance so heavily that it wouldn't matter how strong her urge to prove me wrong might be, it couldn't affect the beam. A bit like having an elephant one side of the balance, it wouldn't matter whether it was a mouse or a man on the other side the elephant would remain firmly down. But supposing I had only asked her to come and punch me hard on the arm rather than slash my face? Now actually with a Quaker volunteer I would still be confident that I would be safe, because I think her beliefs about violence even at this mild level would outweigh her desire to make a point and prove me wrong - though there might be more of a wobble before the beam came down on that side. But with some other audiences I wouldn't be confident of the outcome at all: I could well imagine the situation where someone could feel it was sufficiently important to prove me wrong that this factor would outweigh their reluctance to come forward and hit me in public - ie the balance would be tipped in the other direction.

Using the beam balance analogy, I would suggest that it is when the two sides of the balance are most finely balanced that we get the strongest sense of making a decision and therefore of using

our free will to choose. This is when we hesitate and agonise over a decision – the beam seems to tilt first one way and then the other before coming down to one side. But what I am suggesting is that actually the result of a finely balanced decision is no more the result of a separate free will factor than the result of a decision that is a foregone conclusion - it's just that it takes longer to reach its final settlement and there may be more wobbles to either side on the way.

If you're still not persuaded, I'm going to leave you with a challenge to take away and think about. Think about something you've done that you would rather not have done and go through the following steps. (i) What could you have done differently? (ii) Why didn't you take this other option? And, (iii) thinking of the beam balance analogy, what factors would have tipped the balance in the other direction if they had been different? I hope this exercise will demonstrate that the outcome could only have been different *if the factors operating at that time had been different* - but of course, they weren't.

Evidence from neuropsychology

There is an extensive body of neuropsychological literature on what happens in our brains when we make a decision to act so I will touch only briefly on this area, to give you a flavour of the work.

When initiating a voluntary action, such as moving a hand, electrical activity in the motor areas of the brain responsible for that action can be detected before the person has the conscious experience of making the decision to act. That is, although to the person concerned it feels as if it was his conscious decision, his free will, that caused him to act, to move his hand or whatever, in fact his brain is ahead of him and has already started to put the decision into action before he is aware of creating the intent. Experiments in this area typically find that the area of the brain responsible for the action becomes active some 500-800 msecs before the action actually occurs, but the experience of making the decision to act does not occur until just 200msec or so before the action takes place.

So if our experience of asserting our free will and choosing to act occurs *after* the brain activity that puts the action into motion, then our free will cannot be the cause of that action - even though it feels very convincingly as if it is. Our conscious selves are playing catch up, experiencing making the choice that our brain has already made for us.

But even if free will doesn't actually initiate the intention to act, might it be argued that once the intent becomes conscious we can somehow veto it? – decide to allow the action to go ahead or cancel it? (What has been termed 'free won't' rather than 'free will'.) Is that how we could consciously assert our free will? The problem with this, quite simply, is that the intent to permit or cancel the action would, itself, have to be initiated in our brain before it came into conscious awareness, just as with the first intention, so the problem remains quintessentially the same.

At first sight these results appear shocking – they are so counter intuitive. After all, we all know what it feels like to make a decision and then to act on it – we act, because we have made the decision to act – we have decided what we want to do and then somehow we have sent the message back to our brain to activate the appropriate muscles for action. Surely our experience can't be so wrong?

But actually, if we think about it, wouldn't it be even more surprising if our thoughts, including our intentions to act, *didn't* start in our brain? If they didn't start in our brain, then where would they start? If we resort to some version of a 'ghost in the machine' that communicates with and controls our brain, then in order to initiate the thinking that takes place in our brain this ghost would have to be able to think, reason etc. quite separately from the brain, and ahead of the brain, and it is difficult to see how the 'ghost' might do that – or, indeed, what it might use to do its thinking. If we accept that it is our brains that do our thinking then there is no escaping the fact that thoughts arise in our brain before we are conscious of thinking them.

Quite simply, the belief that our brain is responsible for our thinking is incompatible with the belief that we have free will, since

the choices that we consciously make are the result of neural activity in our brain, activity that occurs before we are consciously aware of it.

Free will as an illusion

First of all, I would like to make it very clear that I am not being reductionist in putting forward the arguments that I have today – I am not reducing human beings to materialistic automatons. I believe we are physical entities with rich conscious experiences, and that we partake in a spiritual dimension that is integrated into the very fabric of our being.

And I am not saying that free will does not exist – self-evidently it does. It exists as a very real, subjective experience. But what I would want to argue strongly is that at a deep level it is not under our conscious control, our decision making is not ‘free’ of other, more fundamental factors.

Put another way, ‘free will’ can be used as a surface level explanation for behaviour but is not appropriate or relevant as a deep level explanation.

The implications

Perfect understanding leads to perfect compassion

I am sure that you are all familiar with the experience of trying to understand *why* something has happened, *why* someone has done what they have done, and finding that the more you understand about the person, his past history and the circumstances he was in, the better able you are to see it from his perspective - and the more you understand him the less inclined you are to judge him adversely. The better the understanding, the less the blame. If we had perfect understanding we would not judge or blame at all; *not because we are being generous or forgiving in some way but because in these circumstances judgement is just not appropriate*, any more than it would be appropriate to judge someone for having blue or brown eyes, or for losing control of their car as the result of a heart attack.

So if, at a deep level, judgement is not appropriate then at this level there can be no blame, no guilt and no sin. And if there is no blame then there is no requirement for forgiveness or atonement. In practice, of course, confession and forgiveness do have very real and positive roles to play in the way we psychologically come to terms with what we have done and what has been done to us, but the practical advantages of saying 'sorry' and 'you're forgiven' is a different issue – what I am arguing is that at a deep level the issue of guilt and forgiveness is not even relevant.

So with perfect understanding comes perfect compassion, compassion for the person as s/he is, in the situation that s/he is in, knowing that this is the inevitable result of the interplay between biological and environmental factors. And this is a compassion that we can and should extend to ourselves as well as to others.

True equality

I would contend that the 'no free will' position is a much firmer basis for true equality than a belief in a world where people *could* but choose *not* to act well.

If free will is an illusion then no one is better than anyone else or worse than anyone else. We all have to tread different paths in life but no one makes a better 'go' of it than anyone else, whatever the appearances; it all depends on the life we have to lead. When we judge someone adversely what we usually mean (whether we are aware of it or not) is that if *I* had been in that situation *I* would have done differently. But of course, I am not the same as that person. I was born differently and have had different influences on my life, so if I would have reacted differently why is that surprising? But that's no credit to me, that I was born differently and have a different life's history.

Now I know that this next statement is a bit of a philosophical minefield, which is why I preface it with a cautionary note that I don't mean it to be taken as a logically precise statement, but one way of thinking about the implications of this that I find helpful is to recognise that if I (or the 'that of God' in me) had been born exactly

the same as you, in exactly the same body and circumstances as you, then I would have made exactly the same decisions as you have made throughout your life, done exactly the same things and ended up in exactly the same place as you have - no better, no worse, exactly the same. After all, how could it be otherwise? But I find this can be a helpful exercise to do (humbling or reassuring, depending on who I'm thinking about!) and one that, I suggest, leads naturally to universal compassion for people wherever and however we find them.

If there is no free will then the onus is on us is to seek to understand rather than judge others, knowing that if we understood perfectly then we would not judge or blame, acknowledging that there are always good reasons for someone doing what they do, even if we do not know and may not even be able to imagine what those reasons might be - so forgiving when we cannot understand.

It also makes us aware that we are all buffeted by the winds of fate, subject to the mercies of how we were born and our subsequent experiences, so we are all equally worthy of respect, whether we appear to be making a good shot at life or a poor one. Indeed, those of us who appear to be making a relatively good, moral shot at life are just lucky.

A personal statement

Although for many years I was very happy to embrace the notion of 'no blame' for past actions because this view seemed to have nothing but beneficial consequences in my clinical work and everyday life, I must admit that I was somewhat reluctant to come to the conclusion that we have no free will for future events either. But in the end I found I could do no other. For me there was no escaping the logical argument that if, at a deep level, free will was not a factor in explaining past events, then it could not be a factor in explaining future events either.

So has my belief that free will is an illusion affected my spiritual life and understanding? The answer has to be 'yes' – but I'm still working on it!

First, I think that having no free will, at this deep level, in no way diminishes who we are or what we are, and I certainly find it makes compassion and acceptance of people just as they are much easier. And in some ways I feel it has freed me to have a greater sense of the 'something other', and to see this 'something other' in a different light. I am unable to describe this adequately in words but it is something to do with the fact that within the physical world and the associated world of consciousness we are all necessary and equal parts of the whole system, a 'whole' which I believe is evolving, beautifully, according to the laws of nature. We are all in it together and it is just a matter of luck whether we are the good, the bad or the ugly. We're not better than Hitler or Hindley, or worse than the saints.

I find that without the isolating effects of thinking we have individual free wills it is easier to see how we are all interconnected with one another, and with the rest of the earth. I also find it easier to appreciate why we must all be necessary and equal parts of the spiritual other – why truly there is 'that of God' in everyone.

Since I can no longer see us each as having a separate free will I have a sense of something else, something about the collective whole, but again I struggle to find words that even come close to expressing this. When writing the presentation the words that came into my mind were 'Thy will be done'. Not that I'm suggesting that we are literally part of some external being's will. We might be, of course, and some people might feel very comfortable seeing it that way, but I don't see it that way, and that's not how I experience it – but it was the nearest I could get.

Could Quakerism incorporate the illusory nature of free will?

Many of the world religions focus heavily on our individuality and our personal responsibility for how we are and how we conduct ourselves, on sin and the just punishment for sin, on the need for forgiveness and how to obtain this. And indeed these notions are also to be found at the centre of Quakerism, albeit expressed more gently than in most religious groups.

So, could Quakerism incorporate the notion that free will is an illusion? How can we understand and maintain the importance of the 'spiritual other' and our relationship with 'the light' if we believe that we don't have free will to make choices? These are very difficult questions, questions that I suspect will take a great deal of time, discussion and contemplation to answer satisfactorily, but I think it is important that we start to think about them. Over the next few decades I suspect that the 'free will is an illusion' position is likely to gain in popularity and acceptance as the science behind it is made more widely known, eg through television programmes and non-specialist books, and I think there is a very real risk that the pro-materialism lobby will seize upon it as more ammunition to advance their position. It would be helpful if we had a response ready, should that occur.

Recommended reading

Harris, Sam. (2012). *Free Will*. Free Press, N.Y. 83pp. Price: £6.99.

A brilliant introduction to all the main arguments concerning free will, delivered in an extremely readable and engaging style in just 66 short pages (plus 8 pages of notes with more details of the evidence).

Blackmore, S. (2010). *Consciousness: An Introduction*. (2nd edn). Hodder Education, London. 540pp. Price: £31.99.

A very comprehensive and detailed introduction to the basic neuroscience of consciousness which includes very open and informative considerations of questions of the nature of 'self' and 'free will'. This very engaging and easy to read volume also covers, in some depth, issues such as the paranormal and near death experiences, and also mystical experiences and meditation, which may make it of particular interest to universalists.

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