

# Free Will

By Leland W. Robinson



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Originally from California, Leland W. Robinson has long had an interest in the natural and social sciences as well as philosophy and religion.

Leland served in both the Army Reserves and the Peace Corps (India, 1966-68), with the latter experience strengthening his interest in Hinduism and Buddhism. After his Peace Corps years, Leland earned an MA and Ph.D. in sociology from Northwestern University, and then began a 30-year career as a sociology professor at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.

Leland greatly valued and enjoyed his role as a teacher, but also is pleased that during his ten years as Department Head he was able to help his department experience record growth in number of faculty, student enrollment, course offerings, scholarship, and outreach to the community. Now retired, Leland moved to Frederick, Maryland, in 2006.

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We humans can mull things over, come to a decision, and then act on that decision. We can also set long-term goals and dedicate our actions, over an extended period of time, toward achieving those goals while simultaneously overcoming obstacles in our path. Furthermore, we can sometimes successfully resist intense social pressure to engage in behavior we consider unethical or immoral. If we consider these abilities as our "will," then we definitely have a will. But what does it mean to have a "free" will? Of what might our will be free?

So, from the perspective of science, even though we humans make decisions that lead to actions that have consequences, those decisions have no freedom from the web of causation.

In this paper I will examine two ways of answering that question, and thus two definitions of free will. The first defines free will as freedom of the human will from causation itself, while the second defines it as freedom of the will from constraints such as physical and social coercions, from our own ignorance or lack of mental health, and

so forth. I will argue that our will lacks the first type of freedom, but enjoys at least some measure of the second. Finally, I will examine the social and spiritual implications of the fact that our will lacks freedom from causation.

## Contra-Causal Free Will

The claim that humans have a free inner agent, an unmoved mover that allows us to make decisions and initiate actions *ex nihilo*, has roots, at least here in the West, in ancient Greek philosophy, Hellenistic Judaism, and especially in early Christian theology as the Christians struggled to reconcile bad human behavior with the idea of an all-powerful, benevolent creator god (Mecklenburger 82-87). The apparent contradiction was reconciled by claiming that God gave to the human soul the power to freely choose between good and evil. Today people may attribute this power to make uncaused decisions to the ego or to some other psychological construct, but the idea is fundamentally the same. In this paper I will refer to this claimed human capacity of the will as "contra-causal free will."<sup>1</sup>

Scientists, generally, have rejected the possibility of this type of free will since it violates their understanding that the universe is a determined one in which every event is caused. So, from the perspective of science, even though we humans make decisions that lead to actions that have consequences, those decisions have no freedom from the web of causation. Rather, the decisions are caused by our genetic inheritance and environmental inputs.<sup>2</sup>

Despite more than a century of trying, no one has yet developed even a single scientifically sound hypothesis

that explains how the human decision-making process could be free of the web of causation (Sompolinsky 40). Given the apparent impossibility of developing a scientific explanation of contra-causal free will, I personally take the position that it does not exist.

Besides, when you think about it, contra-causal free will is also illogical. Choosing requires a motive or reason to make one choice rather than another. If we could make decisions that were free of causes such as genetic predispositions or learned values, motives, desires, fears or habits, then on what basis would those decisions be made? As Tom Clark has put it: “All we need to be good choosers is what we’ve got: a sensory and motivational system that responds adaptively to immediate exigencies, plus a sophisticated reality simulation system that generates hypotheses which can die in our stead” (4). We don’t need some imagined ability to make uncaused decisions.

### Free Will as Freedom From Constraints

The second definition sees free will as the ability to act in accordance with our will when not prevented from doing so by coercions, constraints or compulsions (“Free will” 16). According to this way of using the term, if our thoughts and decisions are free from physical and social coercions and constraints, and also free from our own ignorance and lack of full mental health, we can say we possess free will.

Individuals differ tremendously in the number of limitations placed on the exercise of their will. Someone living in prison or in a police state, or who has learned to be extremely prejudiced and closed minded, or who is suffering from extreme ignorance or serious mental illness, has less of this type of free will than does another who is more fortunate. None of us possesses a will completely free of such limitations, so this type of freedom of the will is, by its very nature, limited.<sup>3</sup>

Because we only experience the world subjectively and are almost totally ignorant of the causal factors guiding our thoughts and behaviors, it is easy to confuse this second type of free will with the first, with contra-causal free will. Subjectively, it feels like our decisions are unrestrained by causal influences. At the time we are mulling things over and trying to decide, we are unaware of the causes of our thoughts or how those causes will result in the particular decision we will reach. Even after we have decided on one option rather than another, our subjective feeling is that we might have made the other choice and certainly were completely free to have done so. And, of course, our language reinforces this subjective experience. For example, I am likely to say “I decided to eat out tonight,” rather than “The decision to eat out tonight arose within me,” even though the latter statement is perhaps more accurate (Breer 34-39).

Whenever we  
come to a decision,  
that decision is  
a result of an  
interaction between  
current stimuli,  
our own genetic  
inputs, and our  
own unique  
combination of  
memories.

Nevertheless, because the decision to eat out tonight arose specifically within *me*, and *I* was the one who followed through on my decision by going out to eat, I can say that I possess the ability to make a decision and to realize it through my actions. In this sense only, I have a will. And since no internal or

external impediment kept me from making that decision and realizing it through my actions, I *can*, in this sense only, claim that my will is free. There is no inaccuracy unless I forget that all of my thoughts, decisions and actions are caused. There is no inaccuracy unless, in my conceit, I imagine myself to be an unmoved mover who can think thoughts and make decisions *ex nihilo*.

### Humans are Complexly Related to their Environment

Once the autobiographical self evolved among our evolutionary ancestors (Damasio), hominids became much more complexly related to their environment. As a result, we humans are very far indeed from being simple stimulus-response machines.

Each of us is a unique individual whose genetic and environmental inputs are unimaginably complex. Each of us has our own unique genetic inputs,<sup>4</sup> and our environmental inputs, from conception onward, differ greatly even for twins raised in the same family. We all have differing experiences, and as a result we all have many billions of memories in our brains, with no two people having the same combination of memories.<sup>5</sup> Whenever we come to a decision, that decision is a result of an interaction between current stimuli, our own genetic inputs, and our own unique combination of memories. These memories, of course, include values and goals we have learned. Furthermore, we have behavioral predispositions that are determined partly by our genetic input and partly by the memory traces left by our prior experiences. And, of course, we also are caused to selectively remember and selectively interpret those memories.<sup>6</sup>

In making decisions, the human brain utilizes what is called its executive function, which involves bringing on line aspects of the brain that allow us to imagine different possible decisions, and to imagine courses of action based on those decisions. It also involves

accessing the brain's memory bank for the possible relevance of past experiences. The executive function is a complex and impressive process—so impressive that it is easy to confuse it with contra-causal free will. But the executive function doesn't operate in a vacuum, unaffected by prior causal influences. It too is enmeshed in the web of causation.

### All a Matter of Luck

Since all human thoughts and actions are caused, the pertinent question is whether a particular cause will have positive or negative consequences. If, for example, we are taught that it is good to plan ahead, to sometimes delay gratification, to behave in a moral way and meet our responsibilities, these learned ideas can have positive influences.

If, on the other hand, we are taught, either directly or through cultural influences, that it is acceptable to manipulate or exploit those with less power, that people in groups other than our own are to be treated with suspicion and hostility, that one has few if any responsibilities, or that planning ahead is not necessary for a successful life, then these learned ideas can have negative influences.

Someone having a generally positive influence on the world is someone who has been lucky enough to have good genes and to have been educated well, using the word "education" in its broadest meaning. Someone having a generally negative influence is someone who has not been so lucky. It is all a matter of luck, and it is appropriate for those of us who have been luckier to be compassionate toward those who have been less fortunate.

### Why Does It Matter?

Since each of us is a unique human being with the ability to consciously make decisions and to carry out our decisions through our behavior, why does it matter that our decisions are

not free of the universe's vast web of causation? Why does it matter that we lack contra-causal free will?

Some have argued that it matters a great deal—that if the public realized that no one has contra-causal free will, then the moral order will be undermined. However, if a particular moral norm has a positive influence on the social order, then it will have that effect even if we give up the idea of contra-causal free will. In fact, if people made uncaused decisions, why would we bother teaching them moral codes? We teach them moral codes because we hope that these codes will have a positive impact on their behavior, and will counteract some of the negative influences of our culture.

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It is true that the lack of contra-causal free will undermines the philosophical/moral notion of fault, and so some are concerned about the potential impact on our legal system. However, society still has the right to protect itself against anti-social behavior, and *legal* notions of fault may still be applied. There are five reasons why a society might punish those whose behavior they define as criminal: deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, victim restitution, and retribution ("Philosophy of Punishment").

With recognition that we have no contra-causal free will, four of the five justifications for punishment—all except retribution—still stand, and retribution is not necessary for the effective functioning of a criminal justice system. In fact, a strong argument can be made that our criminal justice system could be more rationally designed, and would be more effective in reducing criminal behavior, if all thought of retribution (vengeance) was eliminated (Whitman).

Some have argued that if people realize all of their thoughts, decisions, and actions are caused, then they will feel like robots with no real control over their lives. They might think, for example, that since everything is caused, everything is predestined, and therefore the decisions they make do not matter. They can get as drunk as they want at a bar because whether they get in an accident while driving home is predestined, and there is nothing they can do about it. This, of course, is faulty reasoning. Just because our thoughts and decisions are caused does not mean they do not have very real consequences, and to learn otherwise is to learn a completely erroneous, damaging and dangerous idea.

Individuals who have deeply integrated an understanding that contra-causal free will does not exist generally report favorable consequences from having reached this understanding. For example, Sam Harris writes:

Speaking from personal experience, I think that losing the sense of free will has only improved my ethics – by increasing my feelings of compassion and forgiveness, and diminishing my sense of entitlement to the fruits of my own good luck. [...] Losing a belief in free will has not made me fatalistic—in fact, it has increased my feelings of freedom. My hopes, fears, and neuroses seem less personal and indelible (45-46).

Referring to his realization of the non-existence of contra-causal free will, Albert Einstein wrote that it became “a continual consolation in the face of life’s hardships, my own and others’, and an unfailing well-spring of tolerance” (8-9). Derk Pereboom writes that the realization “holds out the promise of greater equanimity by reducing the anger that hinders fulfillment” and by “releasing us from the harmful passions that contribute so much to human distress” (Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*, 212-213). For Paul Breer, giving up a belief in contra-causal free will allows us to “experience more ‘ease of heart,’ more quiet joy, more stability and clarity of mind, greater acceptance of ourselves, greater acceptance of others, more patience, more honesty and openness, greater capacity for intimacy, and greater equanimity in the face of loss” (285).

### Gaining Greater Compassion

All societies could benefit from more compassion and less selfishness and cruelty, but perhaps our outmoded and inaccurate view that we humans possess contra-causal free will gets in the way of our ability to be compassionate. If we see people whose behavior is anti-social and harmful as individuals who could have behaved better but freely chose to behave in harmful ways, it is difficult to feel compassion for them. Instead, we are likely to feel moral indignation, anger, and hostility. It is far easier to behave toward such individuals in a wise and compassionate manner if we recognize that they are not people with an evil free will who deserve to suffer, but rather are people who, just like the rest of us, are a part of the causal web of the universe. We then see both the thought processes that resulted in their anti-social behavior and the anti-social behavior itself as tragic outcomes of unfortunate causal flows. It is then far easier for us to react with wisdom and compassion, and such reactions are always more effective than reactions based on hostility bred from ignorance.

Moving beyond a belief in contra-causal free will not only, as Paul Breer points out, makes it “easier for us to be humane by defusing the moral wrath that intensifies our need to hurt each other” (295), but can also greatly help us be compassionate toward ourselves. We can move beyond the guilt and self-blame which, at their extreme, can make life too painful to endure. While we may still feel saddened, even filled with regret, when our behavior violates norms in which we believe, recognizing that our behavior was caused can save us from being “guilt-ridden” and help us deal more objectively and constructively with our shortcomings. And while we may still feel pleased and fortunate regarding our accomplishments, we may avoid the extreme feelings of self-pride and conceit. Just as we can deal with others in a more dispassionate and objective manner, so in like manner can we deal with ourselves. Over time, as we more fully integrate into our daily consciousness this new understanding, we can gain a greater “ease of heart,” and our emotional world can become richer and more satisfying as we learn to be compassionate with ourselves and with others (Breer 210-211).

### Feeling One with the Universe

In addition to helping us develop compassion, a deep understanding that we have no contra-causal free will can also help us feel one with the universe, a feeling that is, perhaps, the essence of spirituality (Capra 8-9). Once we realize that our will, our consciousness, our thoughts, our feelings, are all fully caused, it is a small step to the realization that everything about us is also fully caused. And when we examine any one causal flow, we discover that we can trace it back in time and out in space until we realize that everything is connected. We need only to fully incorporate that reality into our consciousness. When we do, our sense of existential loneliness and estrangement drops away, and we feel the warm

embrace of a universe from which, in actual fact, we have never been separated.

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This does not involve *believing* in something for which there is no scientific evidence. Instead it involves deeply recognizing what science already tells us is true. Science tells us that our bodies, like everything else in the universe, are quite literally made of stardust and that this directly connects us to the universe (Schrijver & Schrijver; Stager). And these atoms, these elements that make up one’s body, created in distant stars, are constantly being inter-changed with our environment. Each of us, in every aspect of our being, is fully enmeshed in the vast and unimaginably complex causal web of matter and energy that science reveals to us. Guy Claxton puts it this way: “Whether we feel it or know it or not, it is a matter of scientific fact that we are ‘children of the universe.’ No matter how much we may long to belong, in truth we already do” (96).

### Conclusion

Although the concept of contra-causal free will has been promoted by religion, it is not my purpose to criticize

religious faith. Pope Francis, among many others, exemplifies how a traditional religious faith can lead to a beautiful compassion for, and sense of unity with, our fellow human beings and with all of nature. Without ignoring the negative impacts of organized religion, we can still recognize that those who have religious faith may be considered, in some ways, fortunate.

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For those of us, however, who for whatever constellation of causes find ourselves unable to fully and wholeheartedly experience that faith, I would suggest there is another way to tame the insecure and needy ego: we can abandon the idea that we possess the miraculous and supernatural power to make decisions free of the causal forces controlling everything else in the universe. In doing so, we may discover that a door has been opened to a rich and satisfying state of consciousness, one requiring no belief in the supernatural.

A partial and misguided understanding of our lack of contra-causal free will may indeed lead to passivity and irresponsibility, but a deeper exploration can enlarge our compassion for

ourselves and for others and our sense of oneness with the universe. This, in turn, can lead to less selfishness, increased kindness toward other living creatures, increased willingness to protect our environment, and a deeper sense of peace and happiness. It is a path that has brought some significant relief to this angry and judgmental idealist, and I recommend it.

## Notes

1 Other terms are also in widespread use, including “metaphysical free will” and “agent-causal libertarianism.”

2 Although events at the subatomic level seem not to follow our normal understanding of causation, almost all neuroscientists today agree that quantum effects play no role in human thoughts and decisions. This is so for three reasons: 1) Thoughts and decisions involve highly complex interactions between a great many nerve cells located in several areas of the brain, so any quantum effects would be averaged out far below this level (Pereboom, “Determinism al Dente” 12, 21, 34). 2) The human brain operates at warm temperatures, while quantum computing “requires cold temperatures to avoid a quick loss of quantum coherence” (Dehaene 263). 3) The time scale for even awareness of the external world, let alone decision-making, is “unrelated to the femtosecond ( $10^{-25}$ ) scale at which this quantum decoherence typically occurs” (Dehaene 263-264). See also Siefel. As a result, “there is overwhelming scientific evidence that microscopic processes in the brain are just those predicted by familiar laws of physics and chemistry” (Sompolinsky 34-35).

3 It also should be noted that a great deal of our daily behavior is free of conscious decision-making (Bargh and Chartrand).

4 Even identical twins are not genetically identical (Brogaard).

5 The memory capacity of the human brain has been estimated at about 2,500 terabytes (Reber). To put that in perspective, the 19 million volumes in the U.S. Library of Congress represents only about 10 terabytes of data.

6 What we have here are open systems with immensely complex additive and multiplicative interaction effects.

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