FREE WILL:
PHILOSOPHERS AND NEUROSCIENTISTS IN CONVERSATION
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QUESTION FROM NEUROSCIENTISTS: What is a Will?

ANSWER BY A PHILOSOPHER: Pamela Hieronymi (UCLA)

This is a controversial question. We could start by saying that the will is the capacity for choice, or perhaps the capacity for voluntary or intentional action. Doing so will simply spread the controversy to include "choice," "voluntary," or "intentional."

It is often thought that wills are the special possession of humans, or persons, or morally responsible creatures. On this way of thinking, neither chickens nor chess-playing computers possess a will—even though, it might be admitted, chickens have desires on which they act and computers make choices. We might then try to update our working definition to say that the will is the capacity for *free* choice. We would thereby increase the unclarity immensely. (Qualifying a difficult idea with "free" is an attempt to clarify by adding mud.)

To clean some of this mud, I will sketch two broad, contrasting pictures.

On the first, I think more popular, picture, the will is a capacity to "step back" from, to somehow distance yourself from and reflect on, anything that might influence or determine your choices or actions—including your own natural tendencies, inclinations, or dispositions—and then to consciously determine, for yourself, undetermined by those influences, how you will choose or act.[1] On this picture, the will is a capacity to act "freely," where "free" action is action undetermined by anything other than the will of the person—including, importantly, the above-mentioned aspects of the person's psychology—their tendencies, inclinations, dispositions. The will thus conceived is the ability to originate activity independently of any external influence.

So conceived, one might model the will as a kind of internal module from which originates some spontaneous or creative force. Such a module, one might further think, is the special possession of humans, or persons, or morally responsible creatures.

Those utilizing this kind of picture must navigate several hazards. First, the module must not itself become, or contain, a homunculus, lest they face a question about the will of that little

[1] Do you "determine, for yourself, how you will choose" by making another choice? It is important to avoid a regress, at this point.

person—the module is rather the special possession of a person, that which allows the person to act independently. Second, the picture must keep the outputs of the module independent of (completely independent of? only probabilistically determined by?) forces outside of it, including the person's broader psychology. But, finally, those advancing this picture must also, at the same time, address the question of how or why the output of this particular spontaneity-producing module is especially important or significant—why we should identify the *person's* activities with *that module's* activities. This last will be difficult: by design, the module operates independently of any external influence, but much (perhaps all) of what we identify as central to ourselves, as persons, lies outside of it. Thus, it seems the will must operate independently of many (perhaps all) of those psychological features or aspects that we usually identify as constituting the person, and yet its activities must be our own.

On the alternative picture, the will is not an independent module within the subject that originates a spontaneous or creative force. Rather, the will is that collection of more-or-less ordinary, interacting aspects of the person's psychology (their cares, concerns, beliefs, desires, commitments, fears, etc.) that generates intentional, or voluntary, or responsible activity—it is the functioning together of those aspects of mind that account for human activity. On this picture, willed activity, or choice, is "free," not because it is specially independent or spontaneous, but rather because it is distinctively "owned by," due to, or the responsibility of the individual whose activity it is—where the individual is identified, not with a module for spontaneous or creative activity, but as a complex psychological subject whose features are, ultimately, a product of nature and nurture.

Consider the following quotation from philosopher Harry Frankfurt:

> If we consider that a person's will is that by which he moves himself, then what he cares about is far more germane to the character of his will than the decisions or choices he makes. (Frankfurt 1988, 84)

The quotation appears in a paper in which Frankfurt considers situations in which an individual cannot bring themselves either to make or to follow through with certain choices, because (perhaps to their own surprise) the choice is contrary to those things they care most deeply about. Such situations are not rare: You cannot betray a friend; you must accept a certain challenge or job opportunity. Frankfurt's paper thus highlights the potential shallowness and insignificance of mere, or "bare," choice or decision cut loose from the rest of the person.

In the quotation above, Frankfurt *contrasts* the capacity for choice with the will. Again, he identifies the will as those aspects of the person by which the person moves themselves—by which the person is a self-mover. These include not only the person's cares and values, but also their desires, convictions, commitments, beliefs, intentions, emotions, etc. These inform and can sometimes countermand our choices. When they do countermand our choices, we are prevented, *by ourselves*, from making a choice—we find ourselves unwilling either to make it or to follow through on it.

Again, on this picture the will is not an independent module. It is, rather, that collection of more ordinary states of mind that generate the distinctive self-movement of the person. And that "self-movement" does not require independence or spontaneity. It must rather be identified in a different way.

This is the challenge faced by this second picture: Why is the interaction of these ordinary, influenceable, even manipulable, states of mind especially significant? Why is *it* activity for which we are especially responsible? More, how could ordinary, influenced, manipulable states of mind generate activities free enough to ground responsibility?

(Notice that, even though the second picture does not identify the will specifically with the capacity for choice, there may yet, on that picture, be such a capacity, and it may be something to investigate scientifically. However, there is no need for that capacity to be especially spontaneous or independent of external influences.)

For my own part, I find the challenges faced by the first picture impossible to navigate simultaneously. The challenge faced by second, in contrast, I believe can be met.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

Mark Hallett:

Is freedom a necessary characteristic of will? Also, in relation to the second picture, you write: '…willed activity, or choice, is "free," not because it is especially independent or spontaneous, but rather because it is distinctively "owned by," due to, or the responsibility of the individual whose activity it is.…' If someone had a delusion or hallucination and acted on that basis, would the individual be responsible, would he own the act, and would it be free?

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong:

You conclude that the first picture of the will that you discuss faces challenges that cannot be met, but the second picture can meet "the challenge" of identifying "the distinctive self-movement of the person" and which "ordinary states of mind" generate that self-movement. Please tell us more about *how* this challenge can be met. In particular, can neuroscience of the sort that Kreiman and Maoz discuss in their chapter in this volume help defenders of the second picture meet this challenge? How or why not?

Liad Mudrik:

When contrasting the two accounts, the author emphasized the independence of the will. But it was only the first account that referred to the person consciously deciding how to act. Is consciousness also required for the second definition of will? If so, why is consciousness crucial for both definitions? If not, why is it only included in the first one?

RESPONSES TO FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Pamela Hieronymi (UCLA)

Response to Hallett

Is freedom a necessary characteristic of will? Thank you for this question, as it allows me to make an important correction and clarification. To answer: No, freedom is not a necessary characteristic of the will. Rather, the will is a capacity whose operation can be free or unfree, depending on whether that operation is hindered, constrained, defective, or interfered with. Or, this is what I should say. However, sometimes "free" is used in a different way—and I am guilty of so using it, above—to pick out, not the absence of hinderance, constraint, etc., but rather to pick out self-determined movement, activities that in some way originate in or are especially owned by the person. In this second sense of "free," the will is meant to be the source of freedom, and so freedom *is* a necessary characteristic of its operation.

Thinking of the first conception of the will, above (as an internal module that originates creative or spontaneous force): its activity is self-owned, or counts as the movement of the

person, simply *because* nothing external to it has influenced it. Thus, on the first conception, the two senses of "free" coincide. However, on the second picture of the will (as that collection of ordinary states that generate the person's self-movement), the activity of the will is self-owned because it is identified with the operating together of states of mind that we identify as the person (a person who is influenceable by things external to them). And that activity might be (not only influenced, but) hindered, constrained, or interfered with: activity might be one's own and yet unfree. This brings us to **Hallett**'s second question.

If someone has a delusion or a hallucination and acts on that basis, then the operation of their will has been hindered or is defective. Thus, the person is not free (in the first sense, above). They are also not responsible. (Not every hinderance or defect absolves of responsibility, but these typically do.) Whether the action is the person's own, whether it counts as a self-determined act (or "free" in the second sense above), depends on whether we include, within the person's will, the delusional states of mind. On the first picture of the will, we will not; the delusions and hallucinations will be external interferences with the person's will. However, on the second picture of the will, we *might* include the delusional states of mind among those that constitute the person's will. Whether or not we do so will depend on how fully the delusion is incorporated into the rest of the person's life, thought, or personality. Something that only occasionally shows up may be a foreign interference to the person's self-determination, while something that informs most of what the person thinks and does will instead be a feature of their (sadly, defective) will, something that is part of their self-determined activities. This would provide an example of activity that is self-determined (and so "free", in the second sense above) and yet hindered or constrained (and so unfree, in the first sense).

Response to Sinnott-Armstrong

The challenge for the second picture of the will is to make clear why the interaction of ordinary, influenceable, even manipulable, states of mind should count as the self-determination of the person, and so why *this* activity (and what follows from it) should be especially significant, or why *it* grounds responsibility. I would argue that those aspects of our minds for which we can be asked for *our own* reasons—such as our beliefs, resentments, jealousies, pride, distrust—reveal what I would call our *take* on the world, our sense of what is good, important, worthwhile, horrible, unacceptable, disdainful, etc. Further, these states of mind, in being the sort of thing for which we have reasons, are, I would argue, "up to us" in a specific sense. Thus we are, in this sense, self-determining. Because these are states of mind for which we have our own reasons, we are also "answerable" for them—we can be asked for our reasons for them—and so we are, in this limited way, responsible for them. More must be said to explain why we are responsible for them, or for our actions, in any more robust sense.[2]

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[2] I say more about each of these issues in Hieronymi (2008, 2011, 2014, in progress).

How does this way of responding to the challenge relate to brain areas? As is pointed out in Kreiman's chapter on the neural basis of will and in Hopkins and Maoz's chapter on the neural basis of beliefs and desires, both in this volume, there are regions of the brain that seem *not* to contribute to things like beliefs or intentions or jealousies, and others that do—so, we have a start. I would be cautious about assuming that states of mind we have learned to identify in our social interactions—states whose contours are delineated in part by their social functions (the belief that the butler did it, distrust of authority, an intention to quit smoking)—will enjoy a neat, one-to-one mapping to locations in the brain. But, surely, they will be realized in the brain in some way.

Response to Mudrik

Finally, **Mudrik** asks, "What is the role of consciousness, in each picture of the will?" I would suggest that consciousness seems important in the study of willed action because *something like* consciousness is crucial to action.[3] However, once we understand this crucial role, we will see that it is not important that the will *itself*, or that willing *itself*, be conscious.

We identify an event (the movement of a finger, say) as an *action* by identifying it as something that happened because someone *meant* for something to happen (they *meant* to move their finger, or, to push the button, or maybe they meant to move their *other* finger, but were confused by their visual input). To *mean* for something to happen is to have, in some very minimal sense, decided to bring it about.

It follows from the fact that every action requires someone meaning for something to happen that every action will involve some minimal sort of "having in mind"—some representation of what the actor meant to do. If we think of this having in mind as being conscious of, or aware of, what you mean to do, then every action will require *that* form of awareness or consciousness. (If, instead, as I find more plausible, the required having in mind only *typically* involves awareness or consciousness, then it will be possible to act intentionally but subconsciously, without awareness.)

Importantly, though, the thing that you have in mind, in acting, is *what you mean to bring about*—the raising of your finger, say, or the pushing of the button. It is not awareness or consciousness of the psychological operations *by which* you will bring it about. And so, on neither account of the will do we yet have reason to expect ourselves to be conscious of our own will, itself, as it operates.

Why, then, is it so disconcerting to think that the "conscious will" is an "illusion" (as the Libet experiments were thought to show)? I submit this is because of our sense of what it is to *control* a thing.

We naturally think that we control a thing to the extent that we can bring it to be as we would have it to be—to the extent that we can, so to speak, conform it to what we have in mind.

[3] The answer below is also contained in *Minds that Matter* (in progress).

And so it seems that, to control a thing, we must have *it* in mind. We cannot control what we are unaware of, or what happens behind our backs. And so it can seem that, if our willing is *not* conscious, not something of which we are even aware, then it is not something we control. And, if our willing, *itself*, is out of our control, then surely we are not self-determining.

The solution to this problem is not to ensure that we are aware of, or conscious of, our own willing. (Being aware of a thing does not, by itself, bring it under our control.) The solution is, instead, to recognize that our willing is special—it is not out of our own control, just because we are not aware of it, as we do it. (In fact, I would argue, our decision-making is up to us for the same reason and in the same way that our beliefs, our jealousies, our general take on the world is up to us.)

In sum, then, awareness, or consciousness, is important for control, and consciousness, or at least some sort of having in mind, is important for action, but it is not, I think, important that our willing, or our controlling activities themselves, be conscious.

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