

FREE WILL AS A SKILL

John Riser

This article develops a conception of free will as a type of skill based upon the knowledgeable exercise of cognitive abilities. Critiques of some traditional accounts of free will are advanced; and a view is proposed in which acts of free will are those purposively controlled (caused) by acquired information and the learned 'know-how' of deliberation. What makes an act of will free is not that one theoretically could have done otherwise under the specific circumstances, but that one does in fact do otherwise than act in an uninformed, unreflective and thoughtless manner. Implications for moral responsibility are examined.

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In this discussion, I wish to develop a conception of free will as a type of skill, a skill based upon the exercise of cognitive abilities.

Traditionally, free will has been viewed as a manifestation of something called 'will', where the qualifier 'free' indicates a condition (or set of conditions) under which the will, on

occasion, functions. Whether or not the term 'will' refers to something scientifically identifiable, it has been customary in philosophy to consider it as the capacity to choose, decide, etc., and to understand that a free act of will is one which involves a certain kind of cause or, possibly, the lack thereof. Thus, often the relevant cause is considered to be located in one's own internal psychological makeup, such as one's conscious wishes, desires, preferences, intentions, and so on. This is contrasted with causes determining one's choice/decision that come from external factors, such as coercion, threats, manipulation, etc., imposed by other people. For example, I may freely decide to donate money to a charity; but my deciding to hand over money to an armed robber is not usually considered a thoroughly free decision. The difference between free choice/decision and coerced (unfree) choice/decision roughly corresponds to the distinction between a voluntary act and an involuntary act.

There are at least two problems with the preceding type of distinction. First of all, choosing/deciding according to one's *own* inner desires, motivations, wants, etc., does not necessarily define 'free', since the fact that they are one's own is compatible with the fact that one may have had little or no control over their origin and subsequent presence in one's internal psychology. Nature or nurture, heredity or environment can determine an individual's formative emotional condition and the kinds of choices/decisions stemming therefrom. After all, one did not have an original opportunity to select freely one's mental characteristics or the capacities that could enable one subsequently to choose/decide freely.

Secondly, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary is somewhat fuzzy. Returning to the example cited above, my handing over money to the robber could be considered voluntary, even if coerced, since I freely choose to lose my money rather than my life. In cases of extreme coercion, such as severely painful torture or thoroughgoing brainwashing, any responses by the victim I would not consider decisions at all, for a decision, voluntary or not, is

at least a consciously intentional act, whereas those responses are merely behavioral.

Some have tried to circumvent the issue of determining causes, voluntary or not, by arguing that an act of free will is one which has no determining causes. It is thus 'free from' any causation. A major problem here is that a person thereby has no control at all over a 'free' choice/decision, an odd and indeed rather vacuous claim to make. Moreover, how can responsibility be assigned for an act where there was no cause whatsoever for it?

By contrast to the foregoing viewpoints, I submit that the significance of 'free' with respect to acts of will has to do with their being purposively controlled, a control grounded in, and circumscribed by, knowledge and deliberation. As knowledge and deliberation are more or less organized and thorough, control is more or less efficacious and, correspondingly, an act of will is more or less free. Such an act is not one which transcends or eludes circumstances, but one which contributes to what is possible under the given circumstances. Acts of free will are controlled acts, that is, controlled to a relevant, but often not completely specifiable, extent by the process of knowledgeable deliberation, which is a process of computation or calculation that takes an unavoidably incomplete account of a complex of desires, motives, intentions, assorted other causes including expected outcomes, causal possibilities and prevailing circumstances.

In passing, I should acknowledge that I have been using the notions of choosing and willing (deciding) in a somewhat overlapping manner, even though, strictly, choosing is an act of selecting which can be inadvertent, 'random', a matter of indifference, and so on, whereas willing is a deliberate act intended to produce a definite result.

The kind of knowledge constituting the cognitive capability of free will is not a knowing that something is the case; rather it is a knowing *how* to do something, that is, knowing how to organize a decision on behalf of an intended outcome. Perhaps it is not incorrect to say that free will is related to the competent use of means-end rationality.

Further, knowing how to do something is not, to be sure, equivalent, in any given case, to being able actually to do it; for knowledge only controls the manner in which one proceeds, or attempts to proceed, not whether one succeeds in proceeding as intended. To will is to attempt; and in given circumstances it may not be possible, for one reason or another, to bring this attempt to fruition, in other words, to carry out successfully this free decision. Where deliberative ability is informed and regulated by knowledge of relevant circumstances and possibilities, a decision issuing therefrom is, so far forth, free. Thus, free will is the capability, developing yet always limited, to process information in a deliberative manner, aware of the significance of data and the role of reasons, with a view to implementing a conscious choice.

An act of free will is frequently said to occur where one could have done otherwise. It should be observed, however, that 'could' (and 'can') are ambiguously related to different senses of possibility. Logical possibility expresses what is not contradictory (then meaningless) within the acceptable boundaries of language, possibilities that are often colorfully utilized in myth, fable and fantasy. For example, Hercules ascends into heaven after he dies, humans converse intelligibly with non-human animals, and Joshua makes the sun stand still in its orbit around the earth. Another sense of possibility expresses what can be the case according to the laws of nature. Here, of course, not all that is logically possible is possible as well according to natural laws. Events contrary to the generalizations of currently understood laws of nature may be considered miracles (by religious people) or else as yet to be adequately understood only with further scientific investigations.

A third sense of possibility, especially relevant herein, is what I will call circumstantial possibility, that is, what is possible under the concrete circumstances decisively prevailing at the specific time an event occurs. It is this latter sense of possibility that is crucial for whether an act of will is free.

'Could have done otherwise' is applicable, in context, for the first two senses of possibility, that is, one logically could

conceive otherwise than what natural laws dictate and the laws themselves could be revised. But circumstantial possibility cannot be otherwise than what is possible under the actual, governing circumstances. Some have argued that the future could be different if the present were different and, in turn, the present could be different if the past had been different. Yet, it is hard to see how the events of the past, stretching into infinity, could have been different except in a purely conceivable (logical) sense, which is not directly relevant for what does, in fact, occur.

An act of will, then, and any resultant action derived from it, is determined by the causes prevailing at a given time. What makes the act of will free is not that, having done what one willed to do, one could have done otherwise under the specific circumstances, but that one does *in fact* do otherwise than act in an uninformed, unreflective and thoughtless manner. It is, of course, possible under the laws of nature to act in this latter manner, to will an outcome thoughtlessly, indifferently, confusedly. But then the act of will leading to such an action would not, in my view, have been free, that is, free from factors preventing a relevant degree of cognitive self-control in the process.

Acts of free will may be malignant as well as benevolent. Based upon calculations of utility, one may knowingly, thus freely, choose to do what is considered by oneself or others as harmful. Speaking in a thoroughly secular mode, some people freely choose to do 'evil'. To be sure, they probably consider it agreeable or advantageous to do so. The message here is that free will is a necessary, yet not sufficient, condition for humane activity. Required also for such activity is a prevailing disposition toward humane conduct.

As a cognitive skill, a 'know-how', free will is not an innate endowment but a learned capability. Such learning is provided both through deliberate guidance or instruction by others and through one's own self-correcting experience. Accordingly, one learns how to have, that is, to develop and exercise, free will. Free will, then, is not some

native endowment, but a social product, a determining cause itself caused.

As a learned capability, more or less effective, free will is lacking, substantially or altogether, in certain categories of individuals: for example, infants, as well as persons unable, temporarily or permanently, to process information deliberately, such as those with pronounced neurological impairment, those who are 'insane', or those who simply do not understand the significance of what they are choosing/deciding to do. It is, doubtlessly, no easy matter to determine when the cognitive processing capability which is free will first develops in a given individual, when it has developed to the point that moral and/or legal accountability may be ascribed, when it has been debilitated to the extent that certain acts are excusable, and so on. In addition, it is problematic how this skill is best developed.

The interpretation of free will as the cognitive skill of processing information knowledgeably, deliberately and deliberately for the purpose of decision-making makes sense, I believe, of the valuable control that can exist within the framework of universal determinism. The possession of the skill which is free will has its own particular causes that introduce it into the complex connections of this determinism. This by no means entails that the individualized control within free will is not genuine, any more than, by analogy, the causally conditioned learning of a language thereby prevents its controlled (and innovative) use by the learner.

The causality of the skill (ability) of free will is itself causally determined, as remarked above, either by instruction from others or by one's own self-learning, or both. As one matures, probably the latter does, or should, take precedence. Admittedly, a learned skill likely will reflect, to some extent, the techniques and priorities of those who teach it. Moreover, instruction in the exercise of free will as a skill may impose certain patterns or norms for processing information, for identifying and assessing reasons, for estimating outcomes, and so on. One may attempt to control how cognitive control in others functions, to dictate to others

how to think 'properly'. While all of this is so, it remains the case, I believe, that factors contrary to deciding 'on one's own' are inhibited when deliberation is resolutely self-critical with regard both to the information processed and to the way it is processed. Where this critical awareness is operative, acts can still be coerced by others, but thoughtful deliberation cannot be, for otherwise it would not be the kind of critical, reasoned, attentive, cognitive processing that is essential to its being what it is.

A consideration that favors the conception of free will as a cognitive skill is that this conception is compatible, in principle, with ideas of moral and legal responsibility. Whereas, in the following, I will focus upon the connections between free will and moral responsibility, parallel connections apply in the case of legal responsibility.

To begin with, moral responsibility is responsibility for performing, or abstaining from, acts which can be characterized as morally significant, that is, acts whose criteria of evaluation reflect moral rules (prescription, requirements). Here, I will make no attempt to single out what distinguishes *moral* rules from other kinds nor to explore the complicated and contentious issue of what the legitimizing foundation for moral rules might be.

Traditionally, free will has been seen as a necessary pre-supposition or prerequisite of moral responsibility, and an individual has been held, strictly speaking, morally responsible (accountable) for a given act only if it was performed freely. If free will is conceived as the cognitive skill of knowledgeable deliberation, this means, similarly, that an individual is morally responsible for some act only if it is performed under the stimulus and guidance of that skill. How pronounced the role of this skill must be for the act to be considered freely performed is a matter subject to disagreement and, possibly, mutually agreed resolution. In other words, society, more or less explicitly, defines the degree of cognitive control necessary for an act so controlled to be judged freely performed and, therefore, with responsibility involved. The definitions may be unreasonable, unjustified or

confusing; and even when they are thoughtfully formulated, the criteria will be open-ended and adjustable.

As observed earlier, certain categories of individuals lack the skill, continually or intermittently, of knowledgeable deliberation. To these individuals, moral responsibility is not attributed, or is attributed in a lesser degree. Thus, infants are not held morally responsible and young children usually so only to a diminished extent. In other kinds of cases, noted previously, where the cognitive skill of free will is, or was, not capable of directing decision-making, moral responsibility is customarily waived.

The point of holding individuals morally responsible is not only to regulate their conduct but also to facilitate the development of the skill constituting free will. Learning moral responsibility is part of the process of learning free will, of learning that one should, whenever possible, make use of reasoned computation in the production of choices (and other acts).

Moral responsibility, thus, is based upon having, to a relevant degree, the learned skill of free will. The question arises obviously: who or what is responsible for instilling this skill in those who may not have it? In the first instance, the responsibility belongs to those who already possess the skill and can impart it to others, such as children. A component of this instruction, in addition to fostering the skill itself, is introducing a sense of responsibility, moral and otherwise, in those who are learning how to have free will. Included in this instruction is emphasis upon, and clarification of, the responsibility to be responsible, so far as possible, for one's acts. If individuals understand that their acts have consequences and that these consequences matter to themselves and to others, they already have at least the rudiments of the idea of moral responsibility.

Dr John Riser was Professor at the Department of Philosophy at University of Central Florida. jsriser@cox.net