



Free Will

Joseph Keim Campbell

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For my mentor, Keith Lehrer, from whom
I am still learning

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Joseph Keim Campbell

polity

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
1 Free Will	1
1.1 Why Care about Free Will?	2
1.2 Free Will and Fatalism	4
1.3 Time and Truth	7
1.4 Foreknowledge	13
1.5 Determinism	19
2 Moral Responsibility	27
2.1 Moral Responsibility	28
2.2 Freedom and Epistemic Conditions	29
2.3 Other Necessary Conditions	33
2.4 The “Free Will” Crisis	39
2.5 Moral Responsibility without Free Will	41
3 The Problem of Free Will	43
3.1 The First Argument	44
3.2 The Third Argument	48
3.3 The <i>Mind</i> Argument	51
3.4 Free Will Skepticism	54
4 Moral Responsibility: Incompatibilism and Skepticism	58
4.1 The Direct Argument	59
4.2 The Manipulation Argument	66
4.3 The Ultimacy Argument	69

vi *Contents*

5	Free Will Theories	73
5.1	Libertarianism	73
5.2	Free Will Skepticism	83
5.3	Compatibilism	86
5.4	Alternative Views	95
5.5	Final Thoughts	104
	<i>Notes</i>	106
	<i>References</i>	109
	<i>Index</i>	122

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viii *Acknowledgments*

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1

Free Will

This book considers various problems, arguments, and theories surrounding the concept of *free will*. We take the approach that *problems* about free will are best understood in terms of *arguments* for free will skepticism. **Free will skepticism** is the claim that no one has free will. It is the denial of **the free will thesis**: someone has free will. Given our approach, a philosophical problem is a genuine problem only if the underlying skeptical argument is cogent. It is rare that a single argument yields a result accepted by everyone. More often than not, there are various arguments lending different levels of support to related conclusions, together with a multitude of opinions about which arguments are cogent and which arguments are not. *Theories* try to make sense of it all, that is, they try to provide explanations in light of the overall evidence. We start with problems (Chs 1–2) that lead to arguments (Chs 3–4) and try to sort it out in the end by exploring a spectrum of theories about free will (Ch. 5).

My training is primarily in *epistemology*, the theory of knowledge. The central problem in that area of philosophy is the problem of *epistemological skepticism*. How do I know that I have a hand? How do I know that I'm not some handless brain-in-a-vat? As it turns out, these two skeptical problems – epistemological skepticism and free will skepticism – have more in common than one might think. A **skeptic** is one who has doubts but doubts come in degrees. The

2 Free Will

epistemic skeptic has doubts about *knowledge* and in this respect he is like the agnostic who has doubts about God's existence. The atheist has doubts about God's existence, too, but they are more extreme than the doubts of the agnostic. The atheist is a **metaphysical skeptic**, one who denies the existence of something. Free will skepticism is a kind of metaphysical skepticism, doubt reaching the level of denial. My interest in free will is connected with my broader interest in epistemological skepticism and skepticism in general. The main question for me is: Is there a good reason to doubt the existence of free will, and to accept free will skepticism?

Much of this book is concerned with **the compatibility problem**: Is free will compatible with the thesis of determinism? In this chapter, we show that the best arguments for free will skepticism include as a premise the thesis of **incompatibilism**, the view that the free will thesis is incompatible with the thesis of determinism (§ 1.5). Thus, if the free will thesis is compatible with determinism, then the best arguments for free will skepticism are unsound. This doesn't prove that we have free will but it might show that there is no good reason to deny the free will thesis, which is not an insignificant result. Before that we investigate fatalism along with other threats to freedom from time, truth, and foreknowledge (§ 1.2–1.4). But why should we care about free will in the first place (§ 1.1)?

1.1 Why Care about Free Will?

Why care if free will skepticism is true? Why care whether anyone has free will? Why should we care about free will at all? We need to know a little about free will in order to get started. In this book, we adopt the reasonable view, defended in this chapter (§ 1.2) and the next (§ 2.4), that **free will** is the power of *up-to-usness* (Smilansky 2001). In other words, the free will thesis is true if and only if some of our actions are *up to us*. We say "actions" and not "choices," for we regard choices as kinds of actions. This assumption is controversial, and arguably false. Nonetheless, we adopt the methodological approach of understanding free will in terms

of free action, for it makes the subsequent discussion a lot easier.¹ Still, why care if some of our acts are up to us? Why care if any of our actions are free?

Free actions are tied up with a lot of other things about which we care, like *creativity*, *origination*, *ownership*, and *authenticity*. Views of creativity vary (Russell 2008a). Consider Michelangelo's statue: *David*. Is this a case of genuine *origination*? Was Michelangelo the *ultimate source* of the statue? Or was the statue preexistent, as it were, in the various fault lines of the marble slab, waiting for someone like Michelangelo to come along and expose it (cf. Leibniz 1704, 3)? Perhaps there can be human creativity without origination.

Some philosophers disagree and think that in order to be free, persons must be the **ultimate sources** of their actions, that is, the agent performs or even causes his free actions. Sometimes it is added that the actions have no prior causes or influences outside of the agent. These views are explored in more detail later (§§ 1.2, 3.4, 4.3, 5.1). It is undeniable that free action is required in order for us to be the ultimate sources of our actions. If no act is ever free and creativity requires origination in the sense of ultimate sourcehood, then creativity is impossible, too. Even if creativity does not require ultimate sourcehood, even if it is nothing more than the manipulation of something preexistent, it still requires free action. If *nothing* is ever up to us, then we cannot *manipulate* anything. Similar comments hold for claims about concepts like *ownership* and *authenticity* when they are applied to our actions. How can an action be *mine*, something I did, unless it was up to me in the minimal sense to manipulate it, unless it was something about which I had some control?

Free will is also important because it is presumed by many of us to be necessary for moral responsibility. Whether free will is necessary for moral responsibility is a contentious question, in part, because there is no generally accepted definition of "free will." Still, it is reasonable that if nothing is ever up to us, then no one is morally responsible for anything. Given our provisional understanding, it follows that free will is necessary for moral responsibility. Even those philosophers who deny that free will is necessary for moral responsibility believe that some kind of freedom is necessary.

4 Free Will

The connection between free action and moral responsibility is well grounded even though there are huge disagreements about the specifics. At the end of the next chapter, we argue that our provisional definition of “free will” allows for a compromise (§ 2.4).

One might also care about free will because one is curious. There are good reasons for believing that we have free will and equally good reasons for adopting free will skepticism. It is a puzzle to see which position is more reasonable and why. Still, free will is not just a curiosity. It is an exercise in self-understanding. For those of us in the West, free will is part of our concept of *the self*.² Whether you’re interested in the self or philosophical puzzles, or whether you think that moral responsibility matters, or creativity, origination, ownership, authenticity, or free action matter, you should think that free will matters. If you don’t think that any of it matters, probably you didn’t make it to this point of the book!

In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss our preliminary understanding of free will in more detail (§ 1.2). We also motivate free will skepticism with problems about fatalism, time, truth, and foreknowledge (§§ 1.2–1.5). We focus on the *problem of free will* (§ 1.5; Ch. 3), which includes the compatibility problem. What is interesting about this problem is that it remains even if determinism is false! This presents the biggest challenge to free will. If we want to show that there is no compelling reason to adopt free will skepticism, this is the place to start.

1.2 Free Will and Fatalism

Two important views about freedom and control are *monism about free will* and *pluralism about freedom*.³ According to **monism**, all philosophers mean the same thing when they use the term “free will” (van Inwagen 2008). **Pluralists** note that the literature includes multiple and contrary varieties of freedom. Each variety of freedom is interesting and worth wanting, whether or not it counts as *the meaning* of “free will” (Balaguer 2010). For each freedom we may ask several questions. Does anyone have that kind of freedom? Is that