

Cambridge University Press
0521571413 - Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will
Arthur Schopenhauer
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will

awarded the prize by the
Royal Norwegian Society of
Sciences
at Trontheim on 26 January 1839

La liberté est un mystère.
(Freedom is a mystery.)

- 3 The question set by the Royal Society is as follows:

Num liberum hominum arbitrium e sui ipsius conscientia demonstrari potest?

“Can the freedom of the human will be demonstrated from self-consciousness?”

I Definitions

With so important, serious, and difficult a question that is essentially identical with one of the main problems of all medieval and modern philosophy, great accuracy and hence an analysis of the principal concepts coming within its purview are certainly not out of place.

(I) *What is meant by freedom?*

Carefully considered, this concept is *negative*. By it we understand simply the absence of everything that impedes and obstructs; however, the latter as something manifesting force must be something positive. In keeping with the possible nature of this impeding something, the concept has three very different subspecies, namely physical, intellectual, and moral freedom.

- (a) *Physical freedom* is the absence of *material* obstacles of every kind. Thus we speak of free sky, free view, free air, free field, a free place, free heat (that is not chemically bound), free electricality, free course of a stream where it is no longer checked by mountains or sluices, and so on.¹ Even free room, free board, free press, postage-free indicate the absence of onerous conditions that, as hindrances to pleasure, usually attach to such things. But in our thinking, the concept of freedom is most frequently predicated of animals. The characteristic of animals is that their movements proceed from *their will*, are voluntary, and consequently are called *free* when no material obstacle makes this impossible. Now since these obstacles may be of very different kinds, but that which they obstruct is always *the will*, it is preferable, for the sake of simplicity, to take the concept from the positive side, and with it

¹ The extensive use of “free” to designate the lack of a physical obstacle is more idiomatic in German than in English.

Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will

to think of everything that moves only by its will or acts only from its will. This transformation of the concept essentially alters nothing. Accordingly, in this *physical* meaning of the concept of freedom, animals and human beings are called *free* when neither chains, dungeon, nor paralysis, and thus generally no *physical, material* obstacle impedes their actions, but these occur in accordance with their *will*.

This *physical meaning* of the concept of freedom, and especially as the predicate of animals, is the original, immediate, and therefore most frequent one. For this reason, the concept given this meaning is not subject to any doubt or controversy, but its reality can always be verified by experience. For as soon as an animal acts only from its *will*, it is in this sense *free*; and no account is taken here of what may have influenced its will itself. For in this, its original, immediate, and therefore popular meaning, the concept of freedom refers only to an *ability*, that is, precisely to the absence of *physical* obstacles to the actions of the animal. Thus we say that the birds of the air, the animals of the forest are free; human beings are free by nature; only the free are happy. A people is also called free, and by this we understand that it is governed only by laws and that it itself has issued them; for then in every case it obeys only its own will. Accordingly, political freedom is to be classed under physical freedom.

- 5 But as soon as we leave this *physical* freedom and consider the other two kinds, we are concerned no longer with the popular, but with the *philosophical* sense of the concept, which, as is well known, opens the way to many difficulties. It is divisible into two entirely different kinds, namely intellectual and moral freedom.

(b) *Intellectual freedom*, τὸ ἐκούσιον καὶ ἀκούσιον κατὰ διάνοιαν² in Aristotle,³ is taken into consideration here merely for the purpose of making the classification complete. I therefore propose to defer its discussion until the very end of this essay, for by then the concepts to be used therein will have found their explanation already in what has gone before, so that it can be dealt with briefly then. But in the classification it had to come next to physical freedom, since it is most closely related to the latter.

(c) I therefore turn at once to the third kind, to *moral freedom*, which

² "The voluntary and involuntary with respect to thought."

³ Aristotle (384–322 B.C.): Greek philosopher; the phrase cited by Schopenhauer can be found in *Eudemian Ethics*, II, 7, 1223a 23–25 and elsewhere.

Definitions

is really the *liberum arbitrium*⁴ mentioned in the question of the Royal Society.

This concept is connected with that of physical freedom in a manner that also enables us to see its necessarily much later origin. As I have said, physical freedom refers only to material obstacles, and exists at once with the absence of the latter. But in a good many cases it was observed that, without being impeded by material obstacles, a human being was restrained from acting as otherwise would certainly have been in accordance with his will, by mere motives, such as threats, promises, dangers, and the like. The question was therefore raised whether such a human being had still been *free*, or whether, like a physical obstacle, a strong countermotive could actually prevent and render impossible an action according to the will proper. The answer to this could not be difficult for sound common sense, namely that a motive could never act like a physical obstacle, since the latter might easily exceed absolutely the physical forces of a human being, whereas a motive can never be irresistible in itself or have absolute power but may still always be overcome by a *stronger countermotive*, if only it were present and the human being in the given individual case could be determined by it. For we frequently see that even what is usually the strongest of all motives, the preservation of life, is nevertheless overcome by others, e.g., in suicide and the sacrifice of life for others, for opinions and for interests of many kinds; and conversely, that occasionally all degrees of the most extreme tortures on the rack have been surmounted by the mere thought that life would otherwise be lost. But although it was evident from this that motives have no purely objective and absolute compulsion, a subjective and relative one could nevertheless belong to them, namely for the person concerned; and in the end this was the same thing. Hence there remains the question: Is the will itself free? – Here then the concept of freedom, which one had hitherto thought of only in reference to the *ability to act*, was now brought in relation to *willing*, and the problem arose whether willing itself was *free*. But on further consideration, the original, purely empirical, and hence popular concept of freedom proved incapable of entering into this connection with *willing*. For according to this concept, “*free*” means “*in conformity with one’s own will.*” Now if we

⁴ “Free choice of the will.”

Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will

ask whether the will itself is free, we are asking whether it is in conformity with itself; and this of course is self-evident, but it also tells us nothing. As a result of the empirical concept of freedom we have: "I am free, if I can *do what I will*," and the freedom is already decided by this "what I will." But now since we are asking about the freedom of *willing* itself, this question should accordingly be expressed as follows: "Can you also *will* what you will?" This appears as if the willing depended on yet another willing lying behind it. And supposing that this question were answered in the affirmative, there would soon arise the second question: "Can you also will what you will to will?" and thus it would be pushed back to infinity, since we would always think of *one* willing as being dependent on a previous or deeper willing, and thus in vain endeavor to arrive ultimately at a willing that we were bound to conceive and accept as being dependent on absolutely nothing. However, if we wanted to assume such a willing, we could just as well assume the first as any final willing that had been arbitrarily chosen. Yet in this way the question would be reduced to the quite simple one of "can you will?" But whether the mere answering of it in the affirmative decides the freedom of willing is what we wanted to know, and is left unsettled. The original, empirical concept of freedom, a concept drawn from doing, thus refuses to enter into a direct connection with that of willing. Therefore to be able to apply to the will the concept of freedom, one had to modify it by grasping it in a more abstract way. This was done by conceiving through the concept of *freedom* only the absence of all *necessity* in general. Here the concept retains the *negative* character which I had assigned to it at the very beginning. Accordingly, the concept of *necessity*, as the positive concept establishing the former's negative meaning, would have to be discussed first.

We therefore ask what is meant by *necessary*. The usual explanation, that "necessary is that the opposite of which is impossible, or which cannot be otherwise," is merely verbal, a paraphrase of the concept which does not increase our insight. But as the real definition I give the following: *necessary is that which follows from a given sufficient ground*. Like every correct definition, this proposition is capable also of inversion. Now depending on whether this sufficient ground is logical, mathematical, or physical (i.e., causal), the *necessity* will be logical (like that of the conclusion when the premises are given), mathematical (e.g.,

Definitions

the equality of the sides of the triangle if the angles are equal), or physical and real (like the occurrence of the effect as soon as the cause exists). In each case, the necessity adheres to the consequent with equal strictness if the ground is given. Only insofar as we understand something as the consequent of a given ground do we recognize it as necessary; and conversely, as soon as we recognize something as a consequent of a sufficient ground, we see that it is necessary; for all grounds are compelling. This real definition is so adequate and exhaustive that necessity and being the consequence of a given sufficient ground are outright convertible terms, in other words, the one can always be put in the place of the other.^a – Accordingly, absence of necessity would be identical with absence of a determining sufficient ground. Now the contingent is conceived as the opposite of the *necessary*; but the one does not contradict the other. For everything contingent is only *relatively* so. For in the real world, where only the contingent is to be found, every event is *necessary* in regard to its cause; but in regard to everything else with which it coincides in time and space, it is *contingent*. Now as absence of necessity is characteristic of what is free, the latter would have to be dependent on absolutely no cause at all, and consequently would have to be defined as the *absolutely contingent*. This is an extremely problematical concept, one whose conceivability I cannot vouch for, and one which nevertheless coincides in a curious way with the concept of *freedom*. In any case, the *free* remains that which is in no relation necessary; and this means that which is dependent on no ground. Now this concept, applied to the will of a human being, would state that in its manifestations (acts of will) an individual will would not be determined by causes or sufficient reasons in general, for otherwise its acts would not be free but necessary, since the consequent of a given ground (whatever the nature of that ground) is always *necessary*. On this rest *Kant's* definition according to which freedom is the power to initiate *of itself* a series of changes.⁵ For this “of itself,” when reduced to its true meaning, signifies “without antecedent cause”; this, however, is identical with “without necessity.” Thus, although that definition gives the concept of freedom the appearance of being positive, on closer examination its

⁵ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 445/B 473.

^a A discussion of the concept of necessity will be found in my treatise *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, second edition, § 49.

Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will

negative nature is again apparent. – A free will would therefore be one that was not determined by grounds; and since everything determining something else must be a ground – a real ground, i.e., a cause, in the case of real things – a free will would be one that was determined by nothing at all. The particular manifestations of such a will (acts of will)

9 would therefore proceed absolutely and quite originally from itself, without being brought about necessarily by antecedent conditions, and thus without being determined by anything according to a rule. In the case of such a concept clear thinking is at an end because the principle of sufficient reason in all its meanings is the essential form of our whole faculty of cognition, yet here it is supposed to be given up. However, we are not left without even a *terminus technicus* for this concept; it is *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*.⁶ Moreover, this is the only clearly determined, firm, and settled concept of that which is called freedom of the will. Therefore one cannot depart from it without falling into vague and hazy explanations behind which lurks a hesitant insufficiency, as when one speaks of grounds that do not necessarily bring about their consequents. Every consequence of a ground is necessary, and every necessity is a consequence of a ground. From the assumption of such a *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*, the immediate consequence that characterizes this concept itself and is therefore to be stated as its mark is that for a human individual endowed with it, under given external circumstances that are determined quite individually and thoroughly, two diametrically opposed actions are equally possible.

(2) *What is meant by self-consciousness?*

Answer: The consciousness of *our own self* in contrast to the consciousness of *other things*; the latter is the faculty of cognition. Now before those other things ever occur in it, the faculty of cognition contains certain forms of the mode and manner of that occurrence, and accordingly such forms are conditions of the possibility of their objective existence, that is, of their existence as objects for us; as is well known, these forms are time, space, and causality. Now although those forms of cognition reside within us, this is only for our becoming conscious of *other things* as such and always with reference to the latter.

⁶ “Free choice of indifference.”

Definitions

And so, although those forms reside within us, we must not regard them as belonging to *self-consciousness*, but rather as rendering possible *the consciousness of other things*, i.e., objective cognition.

- 10 Further I shall not be tempted by the ambiguity of the word *conscientia*,⁷ used in the question, into including in self-consciousness those moral impulses of human beings known under the name of conscience, or practical reason with its categorical imperatives as maintained by Kant. I shall not be led astray because such impulses occur only as a consequence of experience and reflection and hence of the consciousness of other things; and also because the borderline has not yet been clearly and incontestably drawn between what in those impulses is original and peculiar to human nature, and what is added by moral and religious education. Moreover it can hardly be the Royal Society's intention, by drawing conscience into self-consciousness, to have the question moved over to the grounds of morality, to repeat *Kant's* moral proof or rather postulate of freedom from the moral law that is known *a priori*, on the strength of the conclusion "you can because you ought."⁸

From what has been said it is clear that by far the greatest part of all our consciousness in general is not *self-consciousness* but the *consciousness of other things* or the faculty of cognition. The latter with all its powers is directed outward, and is the scene (indeed, the condition, if we go more deeply into the matter) of the real outer world. It reacts to the latter by apprehending it first through intuition; it then ruminates, so to speak, on what has been gained in this way, and works it up into concepts. *Thinking* consists in the endless combinations of concepts which are carried out with the aid of words. – Thus *self-consciousness* would be only what we retain after subtracting this by far the largest part of our whole consciousness. From this we see already that the wealth of self-consciousness cannot be very great; and so if there should actually reside in self-consciousness the data that are sought for demonstrating the freedom of the will, we may hope they will not escape us. It has also been advanced that an *inner sense*^b constitutes the

⁷ Lexically speaking, the Latin term "conscientia" used in the prize question can mean both "consciousness" and "conscience." However, its occurrence in the phrase "ipsius conscientia" ("conscientia of oneself") rules out the latter meaning on linguistic grounds.

⁸ See *Critique of Practical Reason*, Academy edition, v, 30.

^b It is found already in Cicero (Marcus Tullius Cicero [106–43 B.C.]: Roman orator, statesman, writer, and philosopher) as *tactus interior*: *Academica (Academic Questions)*, I, 7. More clearly in Augustine (Saint Augustine [354–430]: Christian theologian and philosopher), *De libero arbitrio*

Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will

- 11 organ of self-consciousness. This, however, is to be understood figuratively rather than literally, for self-consciousness is immediate. Be that as it may, our next question is what self-consciousness contains, or how a human being becomes immediately conscious of its own self. Answer: Absolutely and entirely as one who *mills*. Everyone who observes his own self-consciousness will soon become aware that its object is at all times his own willing. By this, however, we must understand not merely the definite acts of will that lead at once to deeds, and the explicit decisions together with the actions resulting from them. On the contrary, whoever is capable of grasping in any way that which is essential, in spite of the different modifications of degree and kind, will have no hesitation in reckoning as manifestations of willing all desiring, striving, wishing, longing, yearning, hoping, loving, rejoicing, exulting, and the like, as well as the feeling of unwillingness or repugnance, detesting, fleeing, fearing, being angry, hating, mourning, suffering, in short, all affects and passions. For these are only movements more or less weak or strong, stirrings at one moment violent and stormy, at another mild and faint, of our own will that is either checked or given its way, satisfied or unsatisfied. They all refer in many different ways to the attainment or missing of what is desired, and to the enduring or subduing of what is abhorred. They are therefore definite affections of the same will that is active in decisions and actions.^c Even what are called feelings of pleasure and displeasure are included in the list above; it is true that they exist in a great variety of degrees and kinds; yet they
- 12 can always be reduced to affections of desire or abhorrence and thus to the will itself becoming conscious of itself as satisfied or unsatisfied, impeded or allowed its way. Indeed, this extends even to bodily

(*On the Free Choice of the Will*), II, 3ff. Then in Descartes (René Descartes [1596–1650]: French philosopher and mathematician), *Principia philosophiae* (*Principles of Philosophy*), IV, 190; and in Locke (John Locke [1632–1704]: English philosopher, statesman, and physician) it is fully described. [Schopenhauer's note, except for the parenthetical information.]

^c It is very remarkable that the Church Father *Augustine* was perfectly aware of this, whereas so many of the moderns with their pretended “faculty of feeling” do not see it. Thus in *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*), lib. XIV, c. 6, he speaks of the *affectiones animi* (affective states of the mind), which in the preceding book he brought under four categories, *cupiditas, timor, laetitia, tristitia* (desire, fear, joy, sadness), and he says: *voluntas est quippe in omnibus, imo omnes nihil aliud, quam voluntates sunt: nam quid est cupiditas et laetitia, nisi voluntas in eorum consensionem, quae volumus? et quid est metus atque tristitia, nisi voluntas in dissensionem ab his quae nolumus?* (In them all [desire, fear, joy, sadness] the will is to be found; in fact they are all nothing but affections of the will. For what are desire and joy but the will to consent to what we want? And what are fear and sadness but the will not to consent to what we do not want?) [Schopenhauer's note, except for the parenthetical information.]

Definitions

sensations, pleasant or painful, and to all the countless sensations lying between these two extremes. For the essence of all these affections consists in their entering immediately into self-consciousness as something agreeable or disagreeable to the will. If we carefully consider the matter, we are immediately conscious of our own body only as the outwardly acting organ of the will, and as the seat of receptivity for pleasant or painful sensations. But, as I have just said, these sensations themselves go back to immediate affections of the will which are either agreeable or disagreeable to it. Whether or not we include these mere feelings of pleasure or displeasure, we shall in any case find that all those movements of the will, those variations of willing and not-willing, which with their constant ebb and flow constitute the only object of self-consciousness, or, if the term be preferred, of inner sense, stand in a thoroughgoing and universally acknowledged relation to what is perceived and known in the external world. However, the latter, as already stated, lies no longer in the province of immediate *self-consciousness*, whose limits are reached by us where it passes into the domain of the *consciousness of other things* as soon as we come into contact with the external world. But the objects perceived in the latter are the material and occasion for all those movements and acts of the will. We shall not take this to be a *petitio principii*;⁹ for no one can deny that our willing is concerned always with external objects, is directed to them, revolves around them, and is at any rate occasioned by them in their capacity as motives. For otherwise one would be left with a will completely cut off from the external world and imprisoned in the dark inside of self-consciousness. What is for us still problematical is merely the necessity with which those objects that are situated in the external world determine the acts of the will.

- 13 We therefore find that self-consciousness is very greatly, properly speaking even exclusively, concerned with the *will*. But whether such self-consciousness in this its sole material finds the data from which the *freedom* of that very will would result in the previously discussed and only clear and definite sense of the word is the aim we have in view. We will now steer straight for it after all this tacking, in the course of which we have already come appreciably nearer to it.

⁹ "Begging of the question."