



Coping Without Free Will: An Examination into the Effects on a Belief System of the Rejection of Free Will

Ben Thompson



One of the oldest philosophical debates is about free will. In recent times the debate has intensified as science has begun putting in its two cents. Developments in various sciences suggest that free will is an illusion. One experiment has shown that the neurons associated with finger movement have started firing consistently half of a second before a subject was aware of a will to tap their finger¹. However in all this debate it seems that people are taking a pessimistic view toward a world without free will. This makes sense; it would seem at first thought that if there is no free will then people are not responsible for their actions, and it would not be fair to punish people. A lawless society does not seem appealing, but what would be the point without free will? Who would enjoy a world where they are subject to all its torments with no way to interfere, no way to control it? I would like to paint a prettier picture than that. I would like to suggest that a world without free will is not half bad, maybe even a desirable world to live in. While the unpleasantness of a world without free will has no bearing on its validity, it is still a discussion that must be had, as we must begin to cope without free will; we must examine the consequences of a world without free will.

To understand the world without free will, we must first come up with a definition for free will. Free will is part of the mechanism in the mind which makes decisions, and is itself a mechanism. Free will is a cause of events, while not the effect of anything. In other words it is the beginning of a chain of events. Until the point in time when it causes something, anything is possible. While it is unpredictable it is not arbitrary; it must represent the desires, fears, beliefs, and logic of the mind it inhabits. So to say that someone has free will is to say a chain of events originated solely from her. This is of course only what I think free will would be if it were to exist. It should be noted that to say that something does not have free will, is not to say that it does not make decisions. It is just that there is no free will in these decisions. A computer chess program does not have free will, but it still makes decisions. The program has an assortment of options which it could theoretically make, although only one could be made. It is not aware of which it will choose until it has analyzed all the options and comes to a decision. Of course the decision was determined before it started the analysis. This is not to say that it did not have to go through the analysis. The final decision was determined only because the analysis itself was determined. People make decisions in a similar manner to this.²

Some would think that since there is no free will there is no point to making *good* choices, but since we have options we can still examine our options, contemplate choices, and discuss them with people just as a chess program might reference another program's opinion on a move. And even though the chess program has no free will it still makes the choices that it thinks will make it most likely to win. In a similar manner humans can still strive to achieve morality. Depending on your views of morality it will survive without free will. In an altruistic sense, what is most beneficial to a community will still be the most beneficial whether we have free will or not. Having no free will is not a reason to act immorally or slack off.

Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes* once said "Life's a lot more fun when you're not responsible for your actions,"³ and on one hand he is right. When I say something is responsible for an event I mean that it was one of many things that caused the event to occur. Although, there is a difference between being responsible for something and being accountable. Let's say a wheel fell off of a car resulting in an accident. Although the wheel falling off was responsible for the accident, the wheel itself was not responsible for the accident. This is because the wheel has no free will and something else caused the wheel to fall off. In this case a rock denting the hub of the wheel and allowing the bolts to slip out was responsible for the wheel falling off (it was a really hard rock). However the rock itself was not responsible for the accident, because something else caused the rock to be hurled toward

the hub. Since nothing has free will nothing is ever the beginning of a chain of events, so no object or person is ever responsible for an event, but rather events, situations, and states of objects are responsible for events. However, objects and people can still be accountable for events, in that it would be appropriate for them to be corrected for their actions. Since the car was not severely damaged, all of the parts of the car were in good enough condition for the car to be put back together using all of the original parts. The mechanic fixing the car knew that the wheel had a great likelihood of falling off again. He modified the wheel to make it less likely to fall off, even though it was not responsible itself. In the same way when someone commits a crime, he is not responsible, but we cannot undo the action which changed that individual, so that he would commit crimes. Instead the justice system will put into effect additional consequences upon that individual, in order to make him less likely to commit crimes in the future.

I would like to suggest that justice is not about making things even, or achieving closure for a victim, but rather it has one main goal: preventing future crimes. This would be done by deterring people from committing crimes, theoretically rehabilitating those who do commit crimes, and separating dangerous people from the general population. In my opinion the American justice system focuses too heavily on the last method. As long as one's idea of justice is not involved with revenge it will survive fine without free will. The lack of free will demands us to forgive, but not to ignore. Responses by the justice system to criminal acts are theoretically beneficial to all people involved.

On thing that does not survive the inspection of free will is the concept of evil. People can not be evil as they are just a product of their surroundings. Instead people are, as I say, misguided as a shopping cart wheel. As Lao-Tzu wrote, "His enemies are not demons, but human beings like himself. He doesn't wish them personal harm. Nor does he rejoice in victory."⁴ Forgiveness is a wonderful byproduct of the loss of free will. People must be forgiven for their actions. Once it is accepted that free will does not exist it is much easier to forgive people for their actions. It also becomes easy to forgive yourself, and come to terms with past decisions.

Acceptance is a key reward of a world without free will. Accepting things is a lot easier if you accept you can control everything. We are in the system, not removed from it. In this crazy world we are just here for the ride, to sit back and enjoy it. It is not that we should not try to influence things, but rather accept all results after we have tried to change things. It is not that we should accept everything, just what we cannot influence. What happens happens, yet we seem to somehow get caught up in it all. The idea of accepting what we can't change is not unique to a world without free will, but a world without free will is unique to the idea of accepting what we can't change. Accepting what we cannot change is refreshing.

The absence of free will results in something I like to think of as the ultimate equality. Seeing that everything we are is a product of our surroundings, successful people are only that way because of their surroundings; they are not "better" than a beggar on the streets. They may have worked harder than others, studied longer hours, made better choices, made more sacrifices, and we seem to think this means they deserve the life they have. We think that they are more honorable. This is simply not right though. As Lao-Tzu said, "What is a good man but a bad man's teacher? What is a bad man but a good man's job?"⁵ While people should not be discouraged from being "successful," we must remember they are only, smart, brave, or hard-working because they won a random lottery. We are all equal; we all deserve the same respect. So it would be a mistake to idolize others. Instead we should admire

Notes


- 1 Dennis Overbye "Free will: Now You Have It, Now You Don't," *New York Times*, January 2, 2007.
- 2 Overbye.
- 3 Watterson, Bill. *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2005.
- 4 Lao-Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Harper Perennial, 1988. 31.
- 5 Lao-Tzu, 27.



their talent or the situation that made them do something special. The idea that there are different types of people (good, bad, honorable, dishonorable) is false.

While the free will debate continues to charge forward it is important to keep these things in mind. The complete loss of control can be an unpleasant thought, but in reality we would have little control even with free will. Our beliefs do not change the way the world works, but they change how we act. They can help us understand, and therefore begin to accept, the laws of the universe. In the end after discrediting the concept of free will, we will find ourselves accepting a lot anyways.

Kids Philosophy Slam

 We are pleased once again to print the winning entries for the Kids Philosophy Slam. The topic for 2007 was "Compassion or Violence: Which has a greater impact on society?" All of the participants deserve congratulations and recognition, including the winning students and Capitol Hill Magnet School in St. Paul, Minnesota, which was named the Most Philosophical School in America, for the efforts of its student body. **Congratulations and keep your thinking caps on!**

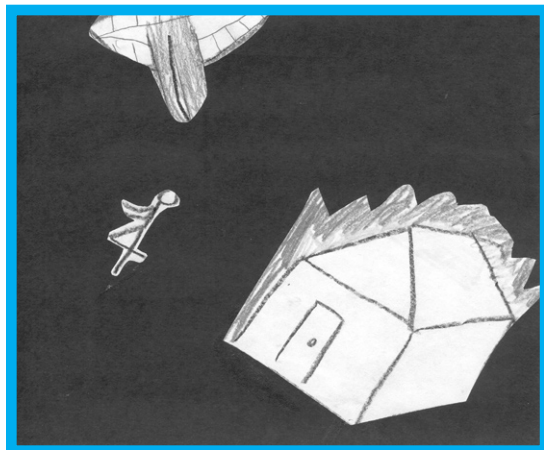
2007–Most Philosophical Kindergartner in America:

Ani Carignan, Illinois.



Even if you do not like somebody you help them.

2007–Most Philosophical 3rd Grader in America:



Violence is war,
Shooting an innocent man,
Killing.
Emotions . . . horrible emotions . . . terrifying emotions.
Like a bad memory or thought.
Also, words, the tongue, saying mean things.
Like something as unimportant as saying a favorite movie is stupid,
Or lying or something as small as lying, can turn into something as big as war.
Violence is mostly thought of as war and killing,
That is violence.
Everybody should think about the possibilities. Violence makes a gigantic impact on society.

Wesley Wells, Oregon

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Kids Philosophy Slam is a competition designed to make philosophy accessible and fun for kids of all ages and abilities, to encourage philosophical dialogue between kids and adults, and to promote a greater awareness of philosophy and education in everyday life. Each year the Kids Philosophy Slam poses a philosophical question to students nationwide such as "What is the meaning of life?" Students can respond to the question with artwork, poetry, or essays. Winners are selected in each grade level from kindergarten through high school. Over \$5,000 in prizes are available to students and schools. The topic for the 2008 Philosophy Slam will be announced in October, online at www.philosophyslam.org.

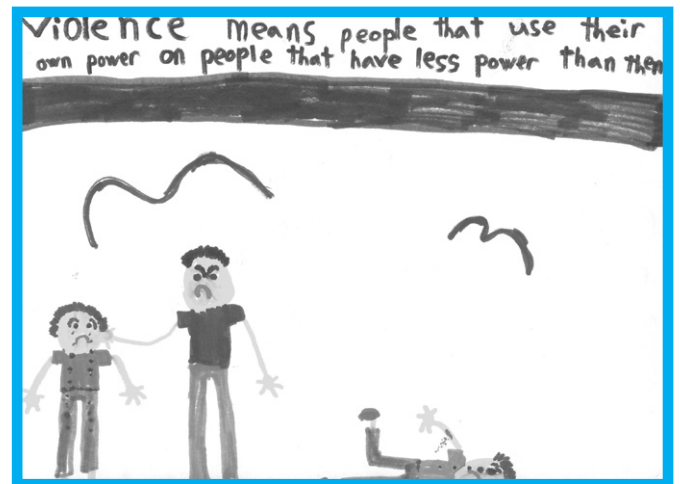
2007–Most Philosophical 1st Grader in America:

Claire Thatch, Maine

I think compassion. Because if people see it they might do it too! Compassion shows love. It soothes people. But violence is bad. It can hurt. People love it when you soothe them. They do not like violence..

2007–Most Philosophical 2nd Grader in America:

Posy Stoller, Illinois



Violence means people that use their own power on people that have less power than them.