

The History and Philosophy of Free Will: An Introduction

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Free will has long occupied a central place in philosophical thought, tracing a rich trajectory from the reflections of the ancients to the systematic treatments of the contemporary age. Far from being a purely historical concern, it continues to command attention in current debates, especially within the analytic tradition, where the tension between alternative accounts of freedom sparks ongoing philosophical discussion.

Long before compatibilism and incompatibilism became philosophical jargon, the debate was already divided between those who—anticipating what would later be called compatibilists—argued that free will could coexist with determinism. They maintained that even if all events were determined by prior causes, individuals could still be free and morally responsible for their actions, provided they acted according to their desires, reasons, and intentions without external coercion. In contrast, their intellectual counterparts, the incompatibilists, held that determinism and genuine freedom were fundamentally incompatible. Across the centuries, these basic positions have persisted in various forms. Among the views that remain most well-known are libertarianism, which holds that agents have indeterministic freedom and the genuine capacity for alternative possibilities; hard determinism, which denies the existence of free will entirely, asserting that all events, including human choices, are causally determined; and mysterians, who argue that the nature of free will is ultimately an insoluble mystery, beyond human understanding.

These enduring distinctions carry significant implications for ethics, responsibility, and our understanding of human agency. If determinism is true, can praise, blame, or moral accountability be justified? If indeterministic freedom exists, how is it exercised, and what are its limits? And if free will is ultimately mysterious, what does that imply about our attempts to resolve these questions?

Tracing the roots of the contemporary debate, this special issue aims to elucidate the contributions of significant figures in the history of philosophy, from the ancients through the early twentieth century, while simultaneously addressing theoretical questions of enduring relevance. Our goal is not merely to document historical developments but to engage critically with the conceptual challenges that continue to animate contemporary discourse. This special issue thus brings together contributions from a range of scholars, including several leading experts, offering original insights and advancing the ongoing dialogue on free will. As evidenced by the vitality of the contemporary debate and the richness of these

papers, far from being a historical relic, the study of free will remains a vibrant and contested field, illuminating the complex nature of human agency and the conditions under which individuals can be held morally accountable.

In *From Guilt to Responsibility: Ancient Theories of Action from Homer to Aristotle (plus Alexander of Aphrodisias)*, Carlo Natali explores how early discussions of responsibility, initially raised by poets and legislators, gradually evolved into systematic philosophical inquiry. He shows how these early reflections on human action and accountability laid the foundation for a more rigorous, conceptual treatment of moral responsibility. Plato sought to challenge the authority of the poets through a rational, Socratic-inspired approach, emphasizing reasoned reflection over mythic narrative. Aristotle, building on and refining this tradition, developed a comprehensive account of human action that evaluates the full spectrum of deeds, rather than focusing solely on wrongdoing or blameworthy acts. Natali emphasizes that Aristotle's notion of responsibility is grounded in a precise ontology of events, linking moral psychology to natural philosophy and highlighting the complex interplay between choice, character, and circumstance. Extending this line of thought, Alexander of Aphrodisias argued that, in any given situation, an agent could choose either of two possible actions—a position supported by the Aristotelian conception of causation as a one-way dependence that does not entail strict necessity. Overall, Natali's study demonstrates both the sophistication and the subtlety of ancient approaches to human responsibility, revealing a nuanced understanding of choice, agency, and moral accountability that laid the groundwork for subsequent philosophical inquiry throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period.

Over the centuries following antiquity, thinkers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Erasmus, and Montaigne, among others, transformed and enriched debates about the will, moral responsibility, and human agency. This long trajectory of reflection set the stage for early modern thinkers to critically reassess the very possibility of freedom, culminating in the radical critiques of the seventeenth century. In particular, Spinoza's rejection of free will in the *Ethics* has long been understood as a challenge to the very idea that the will can be genuinely free. In his *Spinoza on Freedom, Feeling Free, and Acting for the Good*, Leonardo Moauro revisits this critique, offering a refined reinterpretation of its scope and implications. While Spinoza not only denies the freedom of the will but also explains the widespread belief in it as the product of our limited self-knowledge, traditional readings tend to focus primarily on his arguments against incompatibilist conceptions of freedom. Moauro contends that this focus is too narrow, showing that Spinoza's position also undermines compatibilist accounts, according to which freedom consists in self-determination guided by value judgments. On this view, human actions are not directed by rational conceptions of the good but are driven by appetites indifferent to such evaluative ideas, while the sense of acting freely arises from projecting value onto the objects of desire. By denying that we possess the capacity to determine our actions in accordance with our conception of the good, Spinoza rejects a feature commonly regarded as central to agency, thereby revealing his critique of free will to be far more radical and philosophically far-reaching than is often assumed.

Leibniz, in turn, is often regarded as occupying an uneasy position in debates on free will, given his early and persistent skepticism regarding the very coherence of the notion. Throughout his philosophical career, he treats free will not only as dispensable for grounding moral responsibility but also as a potential obstacle to a proper understanding of divine justice and human retribution. In *Free Will in*

Leibniz's Thought, Gianfranco Mormino addresses this tension by reconsidering the role that contingency plays in Leibniz's account of free action. While Leibniz famously insists that free actions must be contingent, Mormino argues that the ability to have acted otherwise, understood in terms of alternative possible worlds, does not, in itself, constitute freedom. Rather, Leibniz conceives freedom as a form of perfection rooted in rational activity, in which actions align with reason and the agent's internal principles. Contingency, on this view, serves not to ground freedom but to explain the possibility of error, showing how human actions can go astray without presupposing an indeterministic will. By disentangling freedom from modal alternatives, Mormino offers a clearer and more nuanced picture of Leibniz's conception of agency and responsibility, demonstrating how moral accountability can be preserved even in the absence of libertarian free will.

The special issue then includes two contributions that examine the relevant work of British empiricists. In *Locke on Free Will and Epistemic Responsibility*, Samuel C. Rickless offers a nuanced analysis of Locke's conception of freedom, framing it as the mind's capacity to act in accordance with its own volitions. For Locke, freedom is a power that inheres only in substances, and humans exercise it in a variety of contexts, including the capacity to suspend the immediate pursuit of their desires. This suspension, however, is not morally neutral; it represents a critical moment for reflection, during which individuals are expected to deliberate on their options and determine which actions are most likely to promote their overall happiness and well-being. Rickless highlights a central tension in Locke's account: human deliberation is susceptible to motivated irrationality, meaning that agents may be led astray by self-interest, bias, or emotion. To act freely and responsibly, individuals must not only weigh their choices but also continually monitor the rationality of their own reasoning. This recursive demand—reflecting on one's own capacity to reason—risks an infinite regress, presenting a profound philosophical challenge and raising enduring questions about the scope and limits of moral responsibility, as well as the feasibility of consistently exercising rational self-governance.

Remaining within the same geographical and intellectual context, Hume's treatment of free will is inseparable from his broader project of developing a science of human nature grounded in experience, sentiment, and social practice. In *Hume on Free Will*, Lorenzo Greco reconstructs this account by drawing on Hume's discussions in both the *Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, showing how his compatibilism gains its full significance within an empiricist, naturalistic, and skeptical framework. From this perspective, human beings are understood as reasonable and active agents whose experience is structured by causal relations that render both individual action and social interaction intelligible. Greco argues that, within such a framework, the problem of free will does not turn on abstract metaphysical concerns about determinism, but on the practical conditions under which responsibility is attributed. For Hume, responsibility is rooted in sentiments of approval and disapproval directed at agents, insofar as their actions express stable character traits, dispositions, and patterns of conduct that are empirically observable and causally explicable. Greco concludes by emphasizing that, although free will may present difficulties in moral or religious contexts, these challenges do not undermine Hume's account, which remains firmly anchored in human practices rather than metaphysical speculation.

The problem of reconciling human freedom with a deterministic understanding of nature is a central challenge for a Hume admirer like Kant. In *Kant on Free Will*, Derk Pereboom examines how Immanuel Kant confronts this tension,

carefully distinguishing his account from Humean compatibilism, Spinozist determinism, and various indeterministic approaches. Kant's theory is both ambitious and nuanced: he defends a form of agent-causal libertarian free will, which he terms transcendental freedom, while simultaneously affirming that the natural world operates under strict causal determinacy according to established scientific principles. At the same time, he is careful to acknowledge the limits of theoretical demonstration; transcendental freedom cannot be established empirically, and our evidence cannot confirm it as a fact of the natural world. Instead, Kant grounds our belief in freedom on practical reasons, arguing that recognizing our capacity for self-determined action is necessary for coherent moral deliberation and the justified attribution of responsibility. By articulating this careful balance, Kant's account preserves the possibility of genuine moral agency without undermining the causal order of nature, offering a distinctive and deeply considered solution to one of the most enduring tensions in philosophical thought.

Remaining within the German philosophical tradition, Thomas Meyer, in *Hegel on Free Will*, offers an insightful and carefully argued analysis of Hegel's conception of freedom, a notion that is central not only to his practical philosophy but also intimately connected with his philosophy of mind, his philosophy of nature, and the *Science of Logic*, forming a cornerstone of his entire philosophical system. Meyer begins by tracing the philosophical motivations and historical influences that shaped Hegel's system, before presenting the account of free will introduced in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Although this account leaves some space for skepticism, Meyer goes further, reconstructing the underlying metaphysical framework of Hegel's notion of freedom as developed in the *Science of Logic*. Through this reconstruction, Meyer illuminates Hegel's effort to navigate the tension between human freedom and the causal determination of the world. He concludes by articulating what he calls Hegelian libertarianism, an incompatibilist and indeterminist interpretation of free will that underscores both the depth and the remarkable complexity of Hegel's thought.

Finally, turning to the early twentieth century, in *Free Will: A Pseudo-Problem? Schlick on a Longstanding Metaphysical and Ethical Debate*, Sofia Bonicalzi examines Moritz Schlick's radical critique of traditional debates over free will, situating his intervention within the framework of logical empiricism. Schlick, a leading figure of the Vienna Circle, argues that much of the controversy arises from persistent conceptual and linguistic confusions surrounding terms such as "freedom," "will," and "determinism." Bonicalzi shows how Schlick's neopositivist approach, marked by a rejection of metaphysical speculation and abstract normative theorizing, effectively reframes the problem: once these concepts are clarified, the apparent paradoxes of free will largely dissolve. At the same time, Schlick acknowledges the continued practical relevance of moral and legal responsibility, provided these issues are addressed within a clear empirical and causal framework. By situating Schlick's critique within the broader philosophical and scientific context of his era, Bonicalzi highlights both the originality and the limits of his position, presenting free will as a pseudo-problem generated by theoretical ambiguity rather than a substantive metaphysical or ethical dilemma.

Taken together, these studies highlight the enduring philosophical engagement with human freedom, the nature of action, and moral responsibility, showing how thinkers across history have explored the capacities, limits, and conditions that define human agency.