



"Ricky & Doris", a film by David Friedman

Ghost in the Machine

*A puppet is free as long as
he loves his strings.*

Sam Harris

ASKED IF HE BELIEVED IN FREE will, the novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer replied, "Of course...I have no choice."

Singer neatly summarized the central dilemma in a subject which has perplexed philosophers, theologians, and moralists of both the East and the West since antiquity: *Does Man have 'free will'?*

If so, how could there be an all-powerful, omniscient God? And if not, what is the point of bothering to make plans, punishing people who commit evil deeds, or—as some fatalists would argue—of even living at all?

The paradox of 'free will' was identified as far back as the ancient Greeks, and is often attributed to Aristotle (4th century BCE).

However, the actual term *free will* (*liberum arbitrium*) was introduced much later, by Christian philosophers in the 4th century CE.

Classic and contemporary arguments about free will cover a wide range, with esoteric names like Incompatibilism, Determinism, Omniscience, and Illusionism—each split into numerous sub-groups. Most scientists fall into the Illusionist camp, believing that free will is an illusion, a chimera generated by consciousness—whose existence, while compelling, is itself only a kind of illusion.

This view is often referred to as *mechanistic determinism*, as it presumes that the physical world operates as a kind of giant machine, with events in the present entirely determined by prior conditions. (Although somewhat undermined in recent years by quantum theory, determinism is assumed to still hold true at scales greater than the sub-atomic.)

While many Christian philosophers and theologians like St. Augustine go through great intellectual contortions to solve the basic problem of free will, Eastern religions generally sidestep the issue, focusing more on spiritual than on personal liberation—envisioning a more deep-rooted freedom that transcends the self and individual.

Buddhism, it can be argued, goes further than determinism by asking, if consciousness is generating the illusion of free will, then who—or what—is perceiving it as such? For Buddhists, the question is not: “Do I have a choice?” but rather, “Who exactly is the ‘me’ that is asking the question?”

In the Buddhist view of ‘no-mind’—just as there is no willful agent doing your breathing, there is just ‘breathing’—no agent is doing your choosing, there is just ‘choosing.’ Put another way, you are not really living your life, life is ‘living’ you.

We may appear to be making conscious choices, but on closer examination, thoughts just appear and disappear in our awareness. By observing this happening—for example, in meditation—one soon realizes, like Thoreau, that “nothing is ever so unfamiliar and startling to us as our own thoughts.”

On the personal level, Buddhism takes a practical ‘Middle Way’ between determinism and the most absolute forms of free will. It accepts that we have choice, but that our range of choices is limited by the past and external conditions—as well as, crucially, by *how we have conditioned our minds*.

In Buddhism, our degree of freedom is a relative quantity, something that can be cultivated through practicing mindfulness. After all, what is the practical extent of our ‘free will’ when we are caught up in strong emotions like desire, jealousy, or anger, or in powerful cravings or addictions?

Moreover, since decisions people make are often based on needs of the ego rather than coming from an authentic ‘self,’ how much free will can they really be said to possess?

The Buddhist concept of freedom is not freedom *to*, but freedom *from*. What we in the West assume is necessary for human freedom—an independent, self-determining ‘self’—is viewed in the East, ironically, as the primary cause of its bondage. Rather than assuming there has to be a self in order to have freedom, Buddhism would say there is freedom only to the extent there is no self!

The Buddhist concept of *anatta*—or ‘not-self’—is often misinterpreted as claiming that the ‘self’ doesn’t really exist, but in fact, it is simply stating the obvious: We exist, but not in the way we *think* we do.

What we call ‘self’ is ever-changing and intimately entangled with the world around us, neither separate nor independent from the causes and conditions that give rise to it.

While some may find this absence of a ‘self’ even more terrifying than the idea that we are merely “biochemical meat puppets” (as one well-known neuroscientist put it), it could also be seen as a liberating prospect. After all, would you rather live in an evolving, unpredictable universe—full of surprises—or inside a vast, dead machine?

In any case, our conscious experience and awareness is not dependent on being free; it just *is*. Regardless of how we each resolve for ourselves the question of free will, we will still experience all the joys and sorrows of life, but there is a sublime freedom that comes with letting go of being the ‘doer.’

Although we may still be only wooden marionettes in the eyes of scientists and philosophers, having this understanding of our true nature allows us to grab hold of our strings and be the masters of our own fate. ■