

What Do We Mean When We Say We Have Free Will?

Thomas A. Blackson
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Draft

Good evening. Thank you for inviting me. My name is Tom Blackson. I am a professor at Arizona State University. My primary area of research is Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy.

My talk tonight is about free will. I am going to help us think about the following question: when we say we did something of our own free will, what are we saying about ourselves?

My approach to finding the answer to this question will be historical. I am going to start by taking us through what the most famous Greek philosophers thought, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. When we do that, we will see that they did not even have the idea of a will. This is a surprise, at least it was to me, but it points us to an answer to our question by showing us that the notion of a will is theoretical. It is part of a theory. When we see the theory in later philosophers that created the notions of a will and of a free will, we get an answer to our question.

This, then, is our plan for the night. We are going on adventure in time. We are going to transport ourselves to the past to understand what we are saying now when we talk about free will.

When we do this, you will see how some of my academic research helped me better understand what I think I mean when I say that human beings have free will. This, obviously, is not the same as me telling you what “we” mean. After we go on this adventure, you might decide that you don’t mean what I think I mean. We will find out. At the end of the talk, I will ask for a show of hands of those who think they do and those who think they don’t mean what I think I mean.

We are about to start our adventure, but first, before we go, I want to say one more thing. When someone goes to an unfamiliar place, it helps to have some idea of what you are going to see. Tonight, as we walk through time and philosophy, you are going to see my reasons for thinking we are not talking about a will and saying that it is free when we say human beings do some things of their own free will. We are doing something else, and I will try to show you what it is.

Okay, let’s have some fun. Let’s step into a time machine and go back twenty-five hundred years.

I. Three thoughts about human beings

When we step out of the machine, we are going to see the surprise I told you about. We are in ancient Athens, the home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. They are the most famous ancient Greek philosophers and maybe the most famous philosophers anywhere ever, but they, even with all their brilliance, did not think human beings have a will. It is not that they were denying a

common belief. No one at the time understood human beings this way “What!” you exclaim in disbelief. “How is that possible?” “Isn’t it just obvious that human beings have a will?”

How do I make you see it is not obvious?

In philosophy, we can make progress by showing that our first thoughts about the issue are wrong. Socrates made this method famous. I am going to use it here.

Our first thought is that if Plato, for example, did not think of human beings as having a will, then his conception of human beings must have been wildly different than ours. This, though, is not true. The philosophers had the same general picture of human beings as we do.

They thought of human beings as psychological beings, as beings whose behavior is understandable in terms of psychological states and processes. Our words *psychology* and *psychological* are pretty much just Greek words. They descend to us from the Greek word ψυχή. This word transliterates as *psyche*, and it gives us the meaning of the English word *psychological* as “about, or relating to, the psyche.” The word *psyche* is maybe a little unusual in ordinary language, but we understand what someone is saying when they use it. We, then, could let *psyche* translate ψυχή, but translators typically don’t do this. Instead, they use the word *soul*.

This traditional translation is not wrong, but it is helpful to know the transliteration because it plays down some of the other worldly connotations the word *soul* can call to mind. The Greeks had views about the ψυχή after we die, but these views are not important for us tonight

Now for another surprise. Although the philosophers thought of the ψυχή as our psychological makeup, ordinary people did not always think this way. I don’t mean that they did not think of human beings as having beliefs and desires and more generally as having what we would call psychological states and processes. They certainly did think this. I mean that before the philosophers, ordinary Greeks thought of the ψυχή as life force that can flit away. The living have beliefs and desires, but these beliefs and desires are not part of their ψυχή.

This seems strange to us because we are children of the philosophers. They extended the ordinary Greek thought into a form we find more familiar. They conceived of the ψυχή as something more than a life force. They conceived of it as an arrangement of beliefs and desires that explains why human beings do what they do. We don’t see this thought in the surviving Greek literature much before the time of Socrates and Plato the 5th century BCE.

So that we keep all this straight, let’s review what we have seen on our tour.

We have seen two thoughts. The first is that human beings, when they are alive, have a ψυχή. The second is that this ψυχή consists of beliefs and desires that cause human beings to do what they do. The first thought is old in Greek culture. We see it in Homer in the 8th century BCE. The second thought is much newer. It is a philosophical innovation. We see it in Socrates and Plato.

Now it is time to see a third thought. It is that there is no action without desire. The motion of my body is not some action I undertake unless I have a desire that puts my body into this motion.

This thought, unlike the first two we saw on our tour, is not particularly Greek. Nor does it stem from a philosophical theory. This third thought is part of how human beings everywhere have pretty much always conceived of themselves and their actions. When I push something over because the wind blows me into it, this is nothing I do. It is not my action. Why? Because pushing the object over was not something I wanted to do. The wind made me do it.

This third thought is important to us for two reasons. First, it presents a problem for the philosophers and their theory of the *ψυχή*. Second, once you see their most famous solution to this problem, you will understand why what we initially thought was crazy is not crazy at all: namely, that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle did not think that human beings have a will.

What we are witnessing, then, in our trip back in time, is a work in progress. Socrates and his followers are building a theory of human beings in terms of the *ψυχή*. The *ψυχή* was a part of traditional Greek thought. The theory was not. It was an innovation, and the philosophers knew they were not going to build a successful theory unless this theory incorporated the third thought. This was the problem they faced. They needed to explain how desires arose in the *ψυχή*.

II. Plato's theory of how desires arise in the souls of human beings

We don't need to look individually at the explanations Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle gave. Socrates did not write anything, so it is hard to know in much detail what he thought. Aristotle follows Plato. For us, then, it is sufficient to consider Plato's explanation.

This explanation is in Plato's middle dialogues. In these dialogues, historians see what has come to be known as Plato's Tripartite Theory of the Soul. If we simplify a little, this theory says that desires arise in two ways in the *ψυχή*. The *ψυχή*, or soul, has parts. It has a part that engages in reasoning, and it has a part in which there is thinking but not reasoning. In the part that engages in reasoning, desires arise from the beliefs we form about what is good and what is bad. We desire the things we believe are good, and we desire to avoid the things we think are bad. In the part of the soul that thinks but does not reason, Plato thought desires arise in a different way. He thought they arose from our pleasurable and painful experiences. This happens just as you would expect. From our pleasurable experiences, we develop desires for the objects of those experiences. From our painful experiences, we develop desires to avoid these objects.

To understand this theory better, it helps to apply it. To do this, we need an example. Here is one from my life. When I was a child, I ate a lot of mindlessly sugary foods. I found eating them pleasurable, and this gave me a strong desire for these foods. Eventually, though, as I became an adult, I saw the error of my ways. I came to believe that these foods were bad for me. Even so, my belief and the accompanying desire did not always prevail in my actions. Sometimes I behaved irrationally. I went for the candy even though I believed that eating it is bad.

We can agree, I hope, that my behavior, although irrational, is familiar, so let's try to understand it from Plato's point of view. This will show us the surprise. We, to describe what I did, would find it natural to say that my "will was weak" or that I was "weak-willed, but this way of talking has no clear reference to anything in Plato's Tripartite Theory. In his theory, there is no "will" in

our psychology that might be weak or strong. To explain why I did what I did, Plato would point to my failure in the past to retrain part of myself so that my actions accord with my reason.

When I came to believe that eating sweets is bad for my health, I needed to retrain the nonreasoning part of my soul by rearranging your life so that my desire to eat sweets would arise less often. Without experiences of eating sweets to reinforce the desire, the desire would eventually become weaker than my new desire not to eat them. “Refrain tonight,” as Hamlet says. “And that shall lend a kind of easiness to the next abstinence, the next more easy.”

I thought through some about what I should do, but I was not very careful. When I went grocery shopping, I did what I had always done. I walked down all the aisles, including the candy aisle. This I should not have done. I was not ready. I had not retrained myself enough. I had not done enough of what Hamlet told his mother to do. As a result, my desire to eat sweets arose in the nonreasoning part of my soul and was stronger than my desire not to eat them.

This, then, is Plato’s explanation. Now for some questions about it.

Is it right? Can it really be true that to explain my behavior, we don’t talk about my will? Or did Plato make a mistake? He did not include a will in his Tripartite Theory, but we find it natural to say that human beings do some things of their own “free will.” Does this mean we think human beings have a will? If it does, where in the candy example am exercising this will?

These questions are hard, but I think we can make progress. Let’s assume that in the human psyche there is a will in addition to beliefs and desires. Now try to use this assumption to give a better explanation of my “weak-willed” behavior than the one I gave in terms of Plato’s Tripartite Theory. If you can’t, this tells us something. It gives us some reason to think we are not talking about a will when we say that we did something of our “own free will.”

Okay. This is your assignment for the break. Explain my behavior in terms of my “weak will.”

Good luck! When we return in ?? minutes, we will continue with our adventure.

III: The Stoics thought that human beings have a will

Welcome back. Let’s see a show of hands. Who thought it was easy to give a better explanation?

For me it would have been hard. History too suggests it is hard. After Socrates and his followers Plato and Aristotle, it is a long time before we see the thought that human beings have a will.

Historians do not agree on who first had this thought, but a standard answer is that we first see it in the Stoic philosopher Epictetus. He lived in the late 1st century CE and early 2nd century CE. This places the thought about 500 years after Athens executed Socrates in 399 BCE.

I am guessing everyone has heard of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, but maybe a couple of words about the Stoics would be helpful. As a school, their time is from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd

century CE. We know their name from ordinary English. Dictionaries give examples like this one, “My stoic uncle showed no emotion at his wife’s funeral.” Maybe something you do not know is that they were called Stoics because of the original meeting place in Athens. A στοά ("stoa") is a type of building, and the Stoics were so-called because they met at a stoa, one known for its murals. Part of this stoa still exists. You can see it in present-day Athens.

In terms of the history of philosophy, the Stoics are in the same tradition as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The Stoics accepted the broad framework for understanding human beings we have been talking about. Like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, they thought of human beings as psychological beings, as beings whose behavior is understandable in terms of a ψυχή, where this is an organization of beliefs and desires that explains why human beings act as they do.

The Stoics, though, did not follow Plato and Aristotle on how desires arise in the soul.

We saw that Plato thought the ψυχή, or soul, has a part that does and a part that does not engage in the kind of thinking Plato called reasoning. The Stoics did not think this was quite right. They thought that in the souls of animals and children, there is a part that does not engage in reasoning. In human adults, though, according to the Stoics, the soul has no such part. They thought that as we become adults, our souls come completely to consist in reason.

The Stoics thought too that part of having reason was having what they called impressions. These impressions are what we would naturally think they are. Now, for example, I have the impression I am giving a talk at a symposium. I have no reason to think this impression is misleading. No one is trying to trick me, at least this is how it seems to me, so I assent and in so doing form the belief that I am giving a talk. I don’t, though, need to assent. If a lot hung on me being right, I might hold back from assenting until I could do some checking to make sure I am not being tricked and that things really are as my impression represents them as being.

We can see, then, that how we deal with our impressions is something we choose. We can, for example, choose to think about our evidence for assenting to an impression. We can think about whether we should assent to it, whether should reject it instead, or whether we should gather more evidence. Another thing we can choose to think about is how our impressions represent the world and whether we care if the world is this way. Or we can think about the consequences of our impressions. We can think about would be true if the impressions were true or were false.

Epictetus gave a name to this ability to deal with our impressions, He called it the προαίρεσις, and translators traditionally translate this as the *will*. They, in doing this, are thinking partly along the following lines. Our desires, so to speak, are our “willings.” They are what we are willing to do in various situations. We get these desires from our beliefs about what is good and bad. We get these beliefs by assenting to our impressions, and assenting to impressions is one of the ways we can deal with our impressions. So, in us as adults, what gives us our “willings”? Epictetus, in translation, says that our “willings” come from how we choose to exercise of our “will.”

In the 1st or 2nd century CE, then, with Epictetus, apparently for one of the first times in history, someone thinks that human beings have a will and that it plays an important role in the explanations of our behavior. Epictetus does not come to this thought because he wants to know

what we mean when we say human beings have free will. No one was talking that way. He and the Stoics are reacting to Plato and Aristotle. They thought that as adults a lot of our mistakes can be traced back to our failure to bring our nonrational desires under the control of reason. The Stoics thought there were no such desires. They thought that our failure is always and only a failure of our beliefs, and Epictetus traces this failure to how we choose to exercise our will.

To understand this Stoic theory better, let's try to use it to explain my behavior in the candy example. In the example, remember, when I became an adult, I heard the arguments that eating candy is not healthy. I cared about my health, so I resolved to change what I ate. I could not, though, just snap my fingers to change my beliefs and thus my behavior. I had to practice believing that eating candy is bad by arranging my life so that I didn't eat it. I rearranged some parts of my life but not others. When I went grocery shopping, I got and assented to the impression that walking the aisles one after another was the best way for me to get the food I wanted in the least amount of time. Instead of assenting to this impression, I should have held back and examined it. I didn't do this. I exercised my will, but I exercised it incorrectly.

This Stoic explanation is different from the Platonic explanation I gave earlier. On the Platonic explanation, I believe that eating candy is bad. For this belief to control my behavior, I need to retrain the nonreasoning part of my soul so that my desire to eat candy is no longer overpowering. On the Stoic explanation, I don't believe that eating candy is bad. It is something I want to believe. I think that believing it would be good, but I can't just snap my fingers to make myself believe it. I need to practice believing it. I need to arrange my life so that I don't eat candy. I do this by dealing with my impressions in a new way, by exercising my will differently so that how I live eventually changes my beliefs about what is good and what is bad.

Here is a chart that summarizes some of the differences between the two explanations:

	Platonic explanation	Stoic explanation
I believe that eating candy is bad	Yes	No
I believe that eating candy is good	No	Yes
I need to retrain myself	Yes	Yes
I need to retrain the nonreasoning part of my soul	Yes	No
I need to retrain the reasoning part of my soul	No	Yes

You can think more about this chart in the break. Try to decide which explanation is the right explanation for my behavior. Is it the Platonic explanation or the Stoic explanation?

Before you go, though, I want to tell you what I thought when I first started thinking about these things. I felt sure that I was going to think the Stoic theory was better because the Stoics talked about the will, but when I asked myself what I thought I was saying when I talked about the will, pretty much all that came to my mind was nothing. I certainly couldn't say that I was thinking the will is what the Stoics thought it was. In all my years of using the expression *free will*, it never crossed my mind that the will is an ability of reason to deal with impressions.

I found this disconcerting. I already failed the assignment I gave you in our first break. I couldn't use the assumption that human beings have a will to give an explanation of my behavior in the candy example better than the Platonic explanation, and now I was finding that the Stoic theory was not helping me understand what I meant when I said that sometimes human beings do things of their "own free will." This made me suspect I was not talking about our psychology.

Okay. Let's go to the break. We will meet again in ?? minutes for the finale. When we do, I will tell you about the Stoic theory of free will. We will also get back into the time machine. We will take a trip forward so that we can see what happened to the Stoics and their theory of free will.

IV. The Stoic theory of free will

Welcome back!

Raise your hand if you think the Stoic explanation is better because it talks about the will. Raise your hand if you just don't know what to think? That was my situation.

Let's see if more information will help.

We want to know what we mean when we say that we did something of our own "free will." To get this knowledge, we are on an adventure in time. We have seen that the Stoics thought that human beings have a will. The next step is to think about their theory of free will.

To say I am not free to do something is to say that some things stand in my way. When these things are no longer in my way, then I am free to do the thing in question.

The Stoics thought of free will like this. They thought that our wills are free when nothing prevents us from exercising them correctly, and they thought the only thing that can prevent us from exercising them correctly is our own beliefs about what is good and what is bad.

This may seem wrong to you. You are probably not going to agree that the only thing that can take our free will from us is false beliefs about what is good and what is bad. A slave chained to the mill, you might think, even if they have no false beliefs, does not have free will.

The Stoics, however, thought this was wrong. They thought if the slave knows what is good and what is bad, then the slave has free will. To see why they thought this, we need to understand two beliefs the Stoics had about human beings and their place in what happens in the world.

These beliefs are a little difficult, and of course you may not agree with them.

The first is that determinism is true. Determinism is the thought that nature works in such a way that whatever happens in the world is the only thing that could have happened. You might think different things could happen, but you are wrong if determinism is true. There is only one future. Your beliefs do not tell you what this future is. That is why we say that different futures are

possible. Given our beliefs, different futures are possible. If determinism is true, however, as the Stoics thought, then whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.

It is easy to be confused about determinism. It does not mean that we don't make choices. Choosing is thinking about what would be best in the circumstances and forming and acting on a desire to do bring about this end. Determinism does not change this. Determinism just means that there is no randomness in the way things unfold in the world, that the same past always results in the same future, that if we could start things again, they would always turn out the same way.

About what happens, the Stoics thought that nature is provident. This is the second of their beliefs we need to understand. They thought that nature, in its providence, arranges and manages things in the world so that things happen in the wisest way possible. To understand this Stoic belief, there are two cases we need to consider about how nature is supposed to work. The wise know what is good and what is bad. The rest of us do not know. In Stoic terminology, we are fools. In the arrangement and management of things, nature takes this fact into account.

In the case of the fool, so that what needs to be done in the world gets done, nature arranges things so that the fool gets the impressions that force them to assent and act to do what needs to be done. For the wise, things are different. Because their beliefs about good and bad are true, they do not act under compulsion. In whatever situation the wise find themselves, they exercise their will and assent to impressions in such a way that they of their own accord do what needs to be done. In both cases, because determinism is true, what needs to be done gets done.

In the light of these two Stoic beliefs, we can see why the Stoics thought even a slave could have free will. The Stoics and the Greeks more generally had firsthand knowledge of slaves. Epictetus himself had been a slave. Being a slave, he and the Stoics thought, is not a problem. The problem, if there is one, is always beliefs. If someone's beliefs about what is good and bad are true, then their will is free. They are exercising their will correctly, even if they are chained to the mill. They form their beliefs and desires in such a way that they do their part in getting done what needs to be done in a world in which things happen in the wisest way possible.

To me, this seems completely wrong. I am not going to agree with the Stoics about the slave. I am not going to agree that living chained to the mill is something that needs to be done and that things like this happen in a world in which things happen in the wisest way possible.

What is important tonight, though, is not whether I agree with the Stoics about this. It is that if the slave makes us reject the Stoic idea that nature is provident, then we must also reject their conception of free will. We can see this if we think about the wise and the foolish. Both have beliefs about good and bad. Both get impressions. Both exercise their will to deal with their impressions, and both act as they do because of their assent to their impressions. What makes it true that only the wills in wise human beings are free is that nature in its providence allows the wise, not the foolish, to act on their own accord because only they know what needs to be done in the situations in which they find themselves. Nature arranges things so that the fool does what needs to be done, but this is not necessary for those of us who have true beliefs

V. What I think I mean when I say we have free will

This was eye-opening for me. Because I didn't think nature was provident in the way the Stoics thought, I saw that their theory of free will was not going to help me understand what I was saying when I said human beings have free will. This reinforced the suspicion I mentioned earlier: that when I said that someone did something of their own "free will," although I was saying something, I was not saying anything about the psychological makeup of human beings.

This suspicion grew stronger when I later learned what happened to the Stoics and their theory of free will. By the 3rd century CE, the school ceased to have followers. We don't hear of Stoics after that, but their idea of a free will lived on in a different form in Christianity. In the 2nd and 3rd century CE, Christian theorists tried to adapt the Stoic idea to solve a problem they faced.

Christianity had mass appeal. Stoicism did not. It was a philosophy. It didn't spread much outside intellectual circles, and, in any case, it didn't last beyond the 3rd century CE. Christianity was much more successful. We do not need to think about why. We just need to know that it spread far and wide and that as a result, large majorities of people started to talk in a new way. They found it natural to say, even to insist, that human beings have free will.

This was true for people who knew nothing about the theories that were supposed to explain what free will is. Origen of Alexandria and other early Christian theorists insisted that we are responsible for our actions even though God made us and the world, and they tried to adapt the Stoic theory of free will to explain this responsibility. Ordinary people could not articulate the theory, which itself was a matter of debate among the Christian theorists. They used the term "free will" to attribute to human beings what the theory of free will was supposed to explain.

I came to think that this was what I was doing when I said that human beings have free will.

If you put a device in my brain while I am sleeping, and if you use that device to give me certain desires in certain situations, I am not acting "of my own free will" if I act on those desires. We can imagine other examples in which we would think that certain things made it such that we were not responsible for what we did, but there are lots of situations we are unsure about. Our conception of when we are or are not responsible is not completely clear. I think there is some way to draw the line, although I cannot draw it myself. So, instead of doing that, I talk about "free will." I don't mean that human beings have a will and that their will is free. What I am doing, without initially realizing it, is expressing myself using words that originated in a Stoic theory and that subsequently spread widely primarily under the influence of Christianity.

If this is right, then talking about free will is a little like talking about the sun rising and setting. In the case of the sun, to talk about a phenomenon we can see, we use words that had their first home in an old and now refuted astronomical theory. We know about this theory because most of us learned about the Copernican revolution when we were in school. In the case of free will, most of us don't get this far. We don't know anything about the ancient theories in which the words first appeared. We feel sure that sometimes we are responsible for what we do, and we express our belief with the words that were born in the theories. When I talk this way, I don't

think I am saying that human beings have a will any more than I think I am saying that the sun circled the earth when I say the sun set yesterday evening and rose again this morning.

This, then, is the answer to our question for the night I find plausible for myself. I took us on quite an adventure through time and philosophy to get to what I think I mean, and you might have questions about some of the things I said. I will try to answer these questions if you ask me, but the most important question is one I can't answer. It is a question about you. What do you take yourself to mean when you say things such as that human beings have free will?

This is your final discussion point for the night. After you have some time to discuss, I will call you back for a show of hands so that you can see if what I think I mean is what "we" mean.

Okay, it is time to count hands. Raise your hand if when you say human beings have free will, you mean what I think I mean. Now raise your hand if you don't mean what I mean.

There you have it!

Thank you for inviting me tonight. I had fun. I hope you did too.