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free will

Human beings move and act within a world that has been both philosophically and scientifically deconstructed. Philosophers and scientists use the faculties of the mind: philosophers attempt to construct ideas and texts that critique human existence while scientists try to “literally” explain the surrounding world in physical and abstract terms. Philosophers make revelations about the moral and ethical implications of our actions, while scientists make radical discoveries that lead to explanations for almost every force that acts on us and our world. We live within the man-made concepts and constructs of time and space. Scientists literally illuminate the world by making “factual” declarations. While philosophy is concerned with thought and evaluation, science in the modern world is preoccupied with definition. Philosophers and scientists claim to speak the truth. Scientists and philosophers fear the concept that our actions are driven not by a series of scientifically or philosophically proven facts and notions, but by pure “free will”. Innovation, in a sense, whether it be philosophic or scientific, has eliminated the concept of freedom of will. In this super-investigated world, does an individual have power over and control of his own actions and of his own life?

Philosophers and scientists have defined and evaluated free will in various ways. Some simply ask the question, “Do we have freedom of will?,” while others ask only, “Are we free?”. Out of these questions, they often pose yet another, “Can we be morally

responsible for our actions?”. One could ask if humans can even have freedom of will in general. Philosophers answer these questions in pure thought and idea while scientists respond to them with abstract equations and theories. Since we are not able to wholly create or reinvent ourselves, we may not be truly free from everything. Even though these questions all demand unique and independently significant answers, they all deal with the issue of whether it is possible for an individual to possess power over his life and whether he can tolerate the responsibility of his own actions.

From the 1600’s to the present day, René Descartes, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Richard Linklater each define and substantiate free will and the ideas of control, philosophy, and science, in various styles and contexts. They each offer radically different interpretations of freedom and control. Descartes presents his ideas by illustrating his own internal struggle to understand who he is and what role he plays in society. In his definition of himself as a philosopher, Descartes believes he is a “Thinking Thing,” or one who wills, understands, and acts. Nietzsche, like Descartes, is also involved in an internal conversation and is on a journey to find himself. However, Nietzsche often hides behind a mask in his writing, preventing the audience from really interpreting and understanding his texts. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche discusses the ultimate role of the will to power and talks about what it means to have not freedom of will, but unfreedom of will. He raises the question of whether an individual should even want to have free will, and whether or not she should actually want to bear moral responsibility for her actions. So far, Descartes and Nietzsche have described free will using only words, but Linklater, on the other hand, shows his ideas in a rotoscope-animated film called *Waking Life*. The film has a flowing and aqueous appearance

making it look as if it were a dream. The main character, the conversations he has, and even the film itself are “free.” The constraints of the physical world have been let loose. The many philosophical discussions presented in the film and the style of the film itself directly and indirectly address the concept of free will. In this essay, I examine pseudo-scientific, philosophic, and artistic responses to “free will”. According to Descartes, Nietzsche, and Linklater, an individual does not *truly* have control of or power over his own life.

Descartes worked in a time when change was frowned upon. Both state and religious officials discouraged people from challenging the beliefs of society; they feared controversy and dissent. People lived in a world dictated not by themselves, but by the rigidly defined laws and customs of their homeland. They often accepted and obeyed by the rules created by those in power. Descartes, in his *Discourse on Method* and in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, questions and challenges the social constructs that exist by proposing his own set of rules. He is on an independent and internal journey to find and gain control of himself. In these two texts, he presents his own path and offers it to the public, not in an effort to compel people to inherit his beliefs, but only to offer the public another opinion. In his text and in his own life, Descartes wants to become self-made. He is on a journey to become entirely in control of his own wills and desires. He wishes to be an individual who is morally responsible for his own actions.

Descartes is only certain of one thing, that, “I am, I exist” (Descartes 64). In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he separates his mind from his body, believing everything that comes from his body to be false. He distrusts his five senses but believes in a “higher” sense. He only needs to think and use his mind to exist. “Then too

there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something..." (Descartes 64). Descartes will be free as long as he has the power to think and maintains control over his body. He believes that he can only trust his wakeful mind, but not his physical body, which he equates with dreams, or false ideas. "But I now know with certainty that I am and also that all these images - and, generally, everything belonging to the nature of the body - could turn out to be nothing but dreams" (Descartes 65-66). It is only external forces that constrain an individual, Descartes says. The person who does not recognize and appreciate the difference between the mind and the body becomes a slave to the physical world. "But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses" (Descartes 66). Descartes achieves his freedom by exercising his mind and rejecting external influence. He directly asserts that anything but his mind is untrue. "What about being nourished or moving about? Since I now do not have a body, these are surely nothing but fictions" (Descartes 65). He abandons his body for his mind, believing his body to be false and his mind to be true.

In his *Discourse on Method*, which was actually published before *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes explicates his journey to find the truth and free himself from the constraints of society. For years at a time Descartes immerses himself in foreign cultures. "...I spent the rest of my youth traveling, seeing courts and armies, mingling with people of diverse temperaments and circumstances, gathering various experiences, testing myself in the encounters that fortune offered me..." (Descartes

5-6). While abroad, he learns of distant laws and conventions in order to better understand his own. Descartes believes that our minds are mostly filled with false customs, habits, and opinions. He creates a method of doubt, believing that if we rid ourselves of our traditions and practices, we will come closer to our good sense, our natural selves, and the truth. He later creates his own set of laws, because he believes “that the following four rules would be sufficient for [him], provided [he] made a firm and constant resolution not even once to fail to observe them” (Descartes 11). He thinks he should “never accept anything as true that [he] did not plainly know to be such...”, and might, “conduct [his] thoughts in an orderly fashion, by commencing with those objects that are simplest and easiest to know...” (Descartes 11). Descartes appreciates free will, for he is on a journey to rise above the control of the physical world and to truly become free. In these passages, Descartes equates beliefs with the body and truth with the mind. In *Discourse on Method*, Descartes rids himself of his own beliefs and customs, and in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he erases his own body. To truly become free, one must first recreate himself by eradicating his customs and should then begin to doubt his own body.

Descartes also embraces freedom of will in his style of writing. He writes openly as if he were engaged in a free conversation with himself. For the most part, he does not fear the future reception of his work, though he does worry about being ridiculed for his ideas (Galileo was under a lot of scrutiny for his work, so Descartes had good reason to be cautious). Descartes ultimately thinks that his philosophy was for the better of society. He published all of his work not only in Latin, but also in French so that it would be accessible to the general public (Latin was the language of the educated,

while French was for the common man). Descartes is honest in his text. He expresses himself and openly converses with the reader and with himself.

Unlike Descartes, who makes his texts accessible, Nietzsche purposefully makes his texts impenetrable. Nietzsche's texts are complex and multilayered. He often hides himself behind a mask, making his ideas difficult to understand. To the untrained reader, *Beyond Good and Evil* might appear as if it were a completely contradictory work. It is therefore easier to interpret Nietzsche's views on free will through the style in which he writes. Because Nietzsche's work is so obscure and elaborate, it is clear that he is an upholder of free will and "self-making" in the mind, which, some might argue, is necessary in order for one to have freedom of will. According to Robert C. Solomon, a philosopher who coincidentally appears in Richard Linklater's film *Waking Life*, "Nietzsche is a powerful defender of...the individual who 'makes himself' by exploring and disciplining his particular talents and distinguishes himself from 'the herd' and the conformist influences of other people" (Solomon 63). Nietzsche puts himself forward as this distinguished individual. As a writer, his literary technique differs from how classical philosophers write while as a philosopher, his thought is notably more complex and disjointed than traditional philosophical discourse. Solomon says Nietzsche's "persistent emphasis on 'instincts,' 'drives,' and 'physiology' suggests a form of determinism based on our biology. Each of us individually has a particular 'nature' that (whether actualized or not) cannot be altered" (Solomon 63). According to Solomon, Nietzsche, like Descartes, discusses free will, truth, and reality in relationship to a conflict between the mind and the body. Nietzsche relies on freedom and free will in the writing of his text. "In his nomadic (though hardly 'free-spirited') life and in his wildly unrestrained works, no

one is more appreciative of freedom than Nietzsche” (Solomon 76). Nietzsche is not concerned with his audience like Descartes is. One could even argue that in his writing Nietzsche uses his free will by acting upon instinct; it is natural for him to protect himself in his writing.

In the content of Nietzsche’s texts, he addresses freedom of will through the notion of “self-making,” bearing responsibility for one’s actions, and through the direct examination of the will in general. Solomon sees two main facets of free will in Nietzsche. “...First, the global sense of self-making...” and “second, what it is to be responsible for a particular action” (Solomon 78). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche discusses the human want for freedom and the need to expose oneself to the truth.

“The desire for ‘freedom of the will’ in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately, in the minds of the half educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and...to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.” (Nietzsche 28)

When Nietzsche discusses bearing responsibility and absolving God and the confines of society he makes a connection to the idea of self-creation as Descartes does. “...In order to be truly morally responsible for what one does, it seems that one would have to be the ultimate cause or origin of oneself, or at least of some crucial part of one’s mental nature” (Strawson). This can be defined as the *causa sui*. Nietzsche does not believe that one can entirely recreate himself in any manner.

Nietzsche makes it clear that the idea of free will is important to the general public, indicating that being out of control, or being the slave to the physical world Descartes describes, is being in a state of nothingness, a notion Nietzsche takes pleasure in but the masses despise. Nietzsche sees “freedom of the will” as exerting a sort of control over oneself or others, forcing the receiving party to obey. “‘Freedom of the will’ - that is the expression for the complex state of delight of the person exercising volition, who commands and at the same time identifies himself with the executor of the order...” (Nietzsche 26). A sentence earlier, Nietzsche says that the one who enjoys willing “thereby enjoys an increase of the sensation of power which accompanies all success” (Nietzsche 26). So not only is free will being in power over a “self”, but it is taking pleasure in the enforcement of orders. Nietzsche directly defines free will as the inflation of the ego. “That which is termed ‘freedom of the will’ is essentially the affect of superiority in relation to him who must obey...” (Nietzsche 25). Nietzsche implies that in order for an individual to have free will, another must have unfreedom of will. Here, free will becomes a sort of outward control, or a control aimed at and over others. These few passages are only minute samples of Nietzsche’s analysis of free will. Here, he only explains freedom of will in a general sense, while in other sections of his text, he discusses particular parts of the Will in detail, such as the will to power and the will to ignorance. Nietzsche’s text moves the discussion out of the ordinary into the unusual, while Linklater’s film raises and lowers the discussion to new heights and depths.

Linklater’s film *Waking Life* addresses freedom of will in a few major ways. Freedom is present in almost all aspects of the film, including the style, the characters, the conversations, and even in how the separate scenes are stitched together. The film

flows. It looks like a waterfall. Nothing in the film is still; either the camera is buoyant or the characters are floating. The film is not focused on perfection of technique or of the people in it. Rather, it is about finding beauty in something uncertain, unstable, and free. Despite the fact that the person who only watches it once will be left confused and dizzy, the conversations in the film connect and come together at the end of the movie. The film ends in the climax of the protagonist's struggle to "wake up" from his dream.

There is one key and obvious conversation that deals with free will that occurs about thirty minutes into the film. Like many of the other discussions, it involves two people, the main character, who does not speak, and another, who does the talking. This discussion focuses on the relationship between science, freedom, and God. The discussion begins by addressing free will as a historical problem. "This problem's been around for a long time, since before Aristotle in B.C. St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, these guys all worried about how we can be free...if God already knows in advance everything you're gonna do" (Linklater). The speaker worries about God being the ultimate decider and believes that God has the power to see everything that goes on in our lives. He goes on to address scientific innovation and the issue of trust in relationship to omnipotent control.

"Nowadays we know that the world operates according to some fundamental physical laws, and these laws govern the behavior of every object in the world. Now, these laws, because they're so trustworthy, they enable incredible technological achievements. But look at yourself. We're just physical systems too." (Linklater)

He begins to worry that science constrains our lives by inhibiting and erasing our freedom. He brings up the idea that God could be in total control of the system and that God set it up. "So it starts to look like whether it's God setting things up in advance...and knowing everything you're gonna do...or whether it's these basic physical laws governing everything. There's not a lot of room left for freedom" (Linklater). Whether one believes in God or has faith in science, one could never be free and be who he would like to be. "You think about individuality, for example, who you are. Who you are is mostly a matter of the free choices that you make. Or take responsibility. You can only be held responsible, you can only be found guilty or admired or respected for things you did of your own free will" (Linklater). Is it possible to be an individual without free will? The speaker wants responsibility and desires to be in control of his own life. The protagonist is stuck in a dream but persistently tries to gain control over his mind and his body. Who we are is determined by the choices we make, and if we do not have the power to make them freely, we will never truly be free. "And that means trying to solve the problem of freedom, finding room for choice and responsibility...and trying to understand individuality" (Linklater). He believes we must become ourselves.

The next scene, though not a conversation and not as rich in content as the scene previously described, also deals with control and freedom. A man is in a car speaking over a loudspeaker. "I'm concerned with the structure. I'm concerned with the systems of control, those that control my life and those that seek to control it even more! I want freedom!" (Linklater). This becomes a theme throughout the film. The characters each explicate their want and fear for and of control. They express their anguish with being a part of a system. The characters in this film need power over their lives.

Even though Descartes, Nietzsche, and Linklater all approach free will in drastically different ways, they all discuss issues of control, self-creation, and power. Each philosopher agrees that the common person, the one who is not scientifically or philosophically gifted, does not have freedom of will. This person is not in control of and does not have power over his own life. Descartes, Nietzsche, and Linklater all describe a struggle to become free. They explain and express their anguish with society and “the system”. Even the philosophically gifted have trouble becoming free, like Nietzsche, who shows his internal struggle in a disjointed text. Descartes, Nietzsche, and Linklater all want to reach a new level of existence, whether it is on a higher or lower plain. Descartes presents his method of becoming free in *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Nietzsche exploits the little free will he has created for himself and writes openly and at liberty, and Linklater shows free will in a film consisting of various philosophical discussions that wrestle with systems of control. Each philosopher has invented a space where they can become free. In this space, they reveal and articulate their dissatisfactions with the constraints of the outside world and the rest of society. They have created a new reality for themselves; Descartes is free in his mind, Nietzsche is free in his writing, and Linklater is free in his animation. Despite their free creations, each thinker is still a slave to the physical world.

The problem of free will will be around forever. As long as people have the ability to let their minds wander, philosophers will struggle to move beyond a world of laws, habits, and customs, and scientists will continue to define the laws that govern the universe. People will always move about in a world of causes and effects. Nothing will be able to just act or be. Those who do move beyond the restrictions of our world will

transcend our existence. Just as the dead do not communicate with the living, the truly free individuals who have wholly reinvented themselves will exist in their own dimensions of time and space being left inaccessible to the rest of the world.

Descartes, Nietzsche, and Linklater, among other philosophers, scientists, and the rest of those whose mind's are gifted, create spaces in which their thoughts become free.

They are able to express their concerns and illustrate their struggles. The existence of humans has been reduced to a world of mathematical equations and abstract ideas from a world of true individuality. Our sphere is no longer our own.

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