

# Free Will: Plato, Spinoza and the Hegelian Synthesis

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Free will remains one of the most intractable problems in philosophy. The two general positions on the condition of the will have long since hardened into dogmatic positions. The first approach is that, since the methods of science deal with laws determining the motions of nature, the human mind, part of that nature, are also hence determined. The other position, simply put, is that the human mind can “abstract” itself from its external environment and hence, is capable of analyzing and considering the world. This implies that, since the mind can so abstract itself, it is not determined by those things external to it. Therefore, if this is true, then the will is free.

## I. The Argument

The immense literature on this question, of course, is far more complex. This paper will argue that any serious theory on the will must go beyond the modern stereotyped arguments of natural determinism or libertarian freedom. The will in this school is something that lives a life – it must struggle to free itself from the merely physical, or that meaningless succession of events that lies at the root of modern materialist science.

“Liberation” here is a very technical concept. It is not a liberation from truth or true knowledge, but that human nature strive to reach freedom, another world for adequate knowledge. There is no good in the “abstract ego” that can do whatever it wants. There is only good if the will reaches its end, which is Truth.

This paper is in partial reaction to the sort of “scientific” approach laid out by James Rachels. His argument is weak largely because of what it assumes. The mere citation of scientific authorities does not establish the nature of the will. The existence of genetics and conditioning as a cause of human behavior is a far cry from arguing that the will is, as a result, determined. Their reasoning is circular: If natural laws create a purely determined natural order, then the human will, a part of that order, itself must be determined. The two Rachels both assume that nature is ruled by its own internal law and hence, human nature must be as well. Rachels has surrendered philosophy to natural science. (Rachels, 2011: 101-103)

Freedom is the opposite of intellectual laziness that finds it easier to be pushed around by natural or social forces. Freedom is a struggle against the constant domination of the outside world. The external world of nature is non-mental, it is a mere succession of physical events. The human mind, by the very fact that it can pursue the ascetic life, is fundamentally distinct from the natural order, since, in order for it to analyze physical phenomenon, the will must be of a different order than the physical realm of nature.

In this vein, Winston Coleman writes,

Thus in the presence of knowledge at the highest level. . . . freedom is reduced to the rule of such knowledge as reason provides; and since knowledge of this kind carries in itself the necessary persuasive force and conviction which leads to unity of thought which is the central factor in intelligent action—the cognitive, for Plato, is also practical—it creates harmony and unity which lead to friendly feeling in the State. (Coleman, 1960: 42)

While dealing with Plato specifically, this approach to free will can easily be applied to an entire philosophical school, one expressed much latter by Spinoza and Hegel. This passage is a summary of the view of the will where the will itself becomes a force for its own liberation from natural forces.

Plato and many others argued that the will is not “free” in the sense that it can do whatever it pleases—a view made famous later on by Hegel—but that its freedom is found in following the sort of knowledge beyond that of the merely physical.

The Rachel argument is one of the problems in this field – they simplify the nature of the will because they assume there is nothing in the external, natural order the will is meant to manifest. For Plato and Hegel, however, that is false – the human mind, collectively speaking, is meant to discover the Truth of existence that is only intimated by a study of the natural order.

In the citation above, Coleman is holding that (at least in the Platonic approach) the will does have a mission: to discover and manifest the Truths that exist outside of nature, but can be symbolically found in the natural order. Many of the attacks on the will's freedom take for granted that nature is “dead” in that it contains no truths that are not inherent to itself.

Spinoza's ethics, largely considered a work of pure determinism, actually takes a much more nuanced approach to the will that is shared by Plato and Hegel. Spinoza writes in Part II of the *Ethics*: “In the mind there is no absolute or free will; but the mind is determined to wish this or that by a cause, which has also been determined by another cause, and this last by another cause, and so on to infinity” (Proposition 48).

Spinoza's here is in the process of building a conception of the will that, while determined by its own internal action, finds its nature and purpose in truth. The point made by this school of thought is that “freedom” has to be defined in detail before we can consider whether the will does conform to this “freedom.” Plato, Spinoza and Hegel all have this in common, since none want to deal with the will unless its mission and purpose is laid out. This purpose dictates the will's “freedom,” not the existential fact of the will's “abstract” nature. Spinoza continues in his *Ethics*,

An emotion towards a thing, which we conceive to be free, is greater than one towards what we conceive to be necessary, and, consequently, still greater than one towards what we conceive as possible, or contingent. But to conceive a thing as free can be nothing else than to conceive it simply, while we are in ignorance of the causes whereby it has been determined to action; therefore, an emotion towards a thing which we conceive simply is, other conditions being equal, greater than one, which we feel towards what is necessary, possible, or contingent, and, consequently, it is the greatest of all (Part V, Proposition V, Proof of the Proposition.)

This is the conclusion to the basic argument. The concept is that the will can only know itself as reflecting the causes that make it up. These causes are not mere dead matter (so common among certain scientific materialists), but refer to the truth of the matter. Here, as with Plato and Hegel, the concept of freedom as the ability to reject or accept certain drives is insignificant and unimportant. The will is free (or can become free) only in the sense Spinoza argues: that the causal chain of our affections be known in its fulness. When we realize this, the will then becomes free, since its nature is laid bare.

David Maletz writes precisely on this topic concerning Hegel,

It is, first, that absence of complete determination by natural forces which allows or compels the mind or spirit to operate by itself and for itself, subject to its own

norms. Second, it is an inherent directedness that belongs to mind or spirit, and that makes its freedom more than merely blank indeterminacy. This directedness is revealed in the striving to confront what is external and open it up by thought, to insist on pressing further until all things are accessible to thought, and finally to so shape the practical conditions of life that they constitute an appropriate home for a life structured in accordance with the mind or spirit's own self-generated imperatives. (Maletz, 1989: 35)

Maletz is arguing the very same point found in Coleman, Spinoza and Plato. Mere indeterminacy is philosophically insignificant. That is not the issue that is argued in the question of the will's freedom. Freedom has here been defined as that faculty of the mind that is grasping its true nature in the understanding of truth itself. Truth causes the will to act rightly. This is not an unfree will. The mere existence of "determination" is not the main variable I deciding on the will's freedom. The will is always determined in that it acts according to antecedent causes. The freedom is about how the mind processes these causes. If the will is determined by the products of reason, it is free.

For the will to be "compelled" in this line of argument is for it to reject (whether knowingly or not) its nature. The nature of the will is to manifest the truth. This truth is processed and understood by the intellect. Plato, Spinoza and Hegel all agree with this concept. The freedom of the will is not separate from the truth it is meant to manifest. These writers may have different conceptions of the relation between mind and will, but this does not vitiate the basic argument.

Famous Hegelian Terry Pinkard writes on Hegel's concept of the free will:

. . . . the will has objects of two types: (i) straightforward desires for this or that thing (particularity); (ii) second-order evaluation of those straightforward desires according to norms and values (universality). Hegel's claim would then be that only when our straightforward desires (the particulars) coincide with our evaluations of what would be good and right to desire (the universal), is our will truly free (Pinkard, 1986: 211)

The will is not something that is either controlled from without or totally free within. This conception of freedom is insignificant only because it denies or ignores the nature of the will. The positivist school treats the will as just one more actor in the natural order. The "idealist" or "rationalist" school of thought (for lack of a better term) stresses that freedom is bound primarily to the mission of the will. It is free if the mission is accomplished, unfree if it is not.

In Pinkard's quotation above, he properly divides the nature of the will into two parts. (i) above is the world of "immediacy." reason has no role, since the will is ruling all. The will here is attracted or repulsed by the world "confronting it" and it acts accordingly. This is a radically unfree state (even when the will is totally indeterminate) because it is subject to any random occurrence. These occurrences can create the emotions of desire or anger, but these are not examples of freedom.

The second part of this (ii) above refers to the ability of reason to reveal the will's purpose to it. Plato and Spinoza all agree that when the will is determined by truth, it is free. When it is determined by falsehood, it is enslaved. Truth, in general terms, is that which derives from a proper rational analysis of the world both within and without the mind. Falsity is when the will is manipulated by inadequate knowledge, that is, forces deriving from emotions and passions.

Pinkard's argument here, taken in part from Hegel and Plato, stress that the "mission"

of the will is found in its “second order” desires or evaluations. The human intellect, and the will that is “attached” to it, is different from the rest of the natural order. It is different because it can have second order desires. Animals and plants are incapable of this kind of desire, since all they have is the first order demand for external objects that satisfy the demands of hunger.

Hegel defines this primitive “abstract right” this way:

The absolutely free will, at the stage when its concept is abstract, has the determinate character of immediacy. Accordingly this stage is its negative actuality, an actuality contrasted with the real world, only an abstractly self-related actuality — the inherently single will of a subject. Pursuant to the moment of the particularity of the will, it has in addition a content consisting of determinate aims and, as exclusive individuality, it has this content at the same time as an external world directly confronting it. (Hegel, part I, section 34)

Hegel's description here is the basic understanding of “libertarian freedom.” that is the existential problem of being able to “abstract” from any external determination. This is a false and misleading conception of freedom because it does not take the will's final end and purpose into consideration. The will in this most primitive sense is “free” from any external determination, and this eventually turns into the will's seeking after its most basic desire. These base desires as such because they are not the subject of reflection, but mere animal attraction. There is nothing human about this except that it is a low level of life that must be overcome for reason to have any role in human affairs whatsoever.

## II. Bringing the Argument Together

This paper has treated Plato, Spinoza and Hegel in that, concerning the will's freedom, they are argument the same basic proposition – the will has a purpose, and that purpose is to understand and act on truth. The structure of the argument can go like this:

1. The will is a human faculty. As a result, it must be attached to what being specifically human actually is. The will then is attached to the nature of human life and thought.
2. The purpose of the will is to manifest the truth. This truth is the domain of the intellect, but there is no real separation between the intellect and the will when it comes to fulfilling its “mission.” the will simply places the understanding of the intellect into daily life. The essence does not change.
3. Freedom is defined here not as “abstract right” in the Hegelian sense, but as the manifestation of human reason. Therefore, the human will is always “determined,” but not in the sense normally argued.
4. Freedom of the will is defined roughly as the will approaching its own nature. This nature is, again roughly speaking, the approach and grasp of truth.
5. For the will to be determined is for it to follow the “adequate knowledge” the intellect can supply to it. In this case, determinism and freedom are the same thing, since the freedom of the will is defined as the will seeking its own end.
6. For the will to be determined by any random chain of external events is not the meaning of “determined” in this case. The will that is determined by emotions or external drives is determined by falsehood. When the will is determined by truth (or its own nature) it is free. Therefore, the two conception of the word “determined” have to be understood beforehand.
7. The will can be both free and determined so long as we know the nature of what is determining it. True ideas (or the adequate ideas of Spinoza) is bringing the will to its

nature. The will finds its freedom as its own nature is revealed to it. This nature is as the reflection of adequate knowledge. Emotions are the result of partial knowledge where reason has yet to fully grasp the action that is creating the emotion. Once all significant causes of the action that is causing the emotion are explained, the emotion disappears.

8. Emotions for Plato and Spinoza are a bad things because it shows that the will has yet to fully understand the actions in question.
9. The final end of the will Therefore, is to reflect the truth and be determined only by the products of reason.

### III. Conclusions: Making the Argument Work

This paper dealt with the question of free will relative to those things existing outside it. The free will is not a condition of mere indeterminacy. The will is not a random natural force, but is rather the highest expression of humanity, and that is reason. Plato, Spinoza and Hegel all made the identical argument: that freedom is a state where the will acts upon what is proper to it, and that is the truth. The opposite of this is when the will responds to what is foreign to it, namely the emotions and passions that exist from lack of knowledge. Whether it be Plato's Forms, Spinoza's Substance or Hegel's Idea, the concept is identical. The will is free only to the extent the intellect brings the will to its proper end, the truths of reason.

Reason and will are tightly integrated processes. To make an argument for the will's freedom is also to make an argument about the nature, structure and purpose of reason. A will detached from reason is nothing but an animal response, the same response that Rachels and many others have made on the authority of natural science. Natural science has a role, but this cannot deal with the basic axioms of behavior, which are outside its competence. Since science cannot conceive of anything immaterial, it cannot comment whatsoever on issues such as Plato's forms or Hegel's Idea. These are not within the ken of science, but serve as its axiomatic basis. They are not proofs because they are the ground for any proof. For the materialist school of Rachels to argue otherwise is circular: a separate ground must be posited for the scientific method, and that ground comes from the intellect and its relation to truth. The will is the practical expression of this, and hence, under these circumstances, is free.

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