

Chapter: Living without free will

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Book: Exploring the Illusion of Free Will and Moral Responsibility

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Am I writing this chapter of my own free will?

No. I neither believe in free will, nor have the feeling of having free will. These two statements are different. The first is a purely intellectual claim and relates to the myriad arguments about free will that have raged over the centuries. In denying the existence of free will, I stand with many others on one side of this long debate. The second is a personal claim about how I live my life, and here I am in a very small minority. Indeed people have often told me that the way I live my life is impossible, or that it's possible but if everyone lived this way morality and the rule of law would collapse and all hell would break loose. But unless I am deeply deluded (which is possible), they are wrong.

I shall not say much about my intellectual position on free will. This book contains far better and subtler arguments than I can muster. In summary, the kind of free will I deny is the sort most ordinary people believe in – a contra-causal kind of free will, the idea that their thoughts or conscious decisions are the ultimate cause of their actions and that those thoughts and decisions are free from prior causes of their own.

There is a danger in making assumptions about what other people believe, but in lectures I often ask the audience to carry out some simple action of their own choosing and they typically clap, or stand up, or scratch their noses, or tap the tops of their heads. Asked why, some call on biological, social or physical causes (such as brain events, my actions, or the temperature in the room) but many claim simply that 'I' decided to do it, or that 'my mind' or 'my thoughts' caused it to happen.

This is the common intuition that underlies belief in free will, and there is plenty of research suggesting that it is both false and misleading. One line of research stems from Libet's original work on the timing of voluntary actions (1985). This has been amply replicated and deeply debated ever since. Another is the rapidly developing neuroscience of volition which reveals the many areas in the prefrontal cortex, supplementary motor area and parietal lobe which manage decision making and impulse suppression (e.g. Haggard 2008). A third explores the mechanisms involved when people come to believe that they did or did not cause their own actions. This research, pioneered by Wegner (2002), shows that the feeling that I did, or did not, do something is not proof of causation but is a post-hoc attribution based on sequence, timing and other variables.

Despite all this knowledge, the powerful feeling that 'I' can freely cause 'my' actions persists.

Inherent in that last sentence is the difficulty of writing about self. If that sentence appears to refer to two different things in the words, 'I' and 'my', that is because it does. The first is the fictional inner self who seems to be a persisting entity with consciousness and free will: the second is the whole human being; a brain and body carrying out actions and being held, or not held, responsible for them. The feeling of having free will amounts to the idea that the inner self can freely cause the body to act.

I (the whole human being) have written elsewhere about the illusion of self (Blackmore 1999, 2010). By 'illusion' I do not mean something that does not exist but something that is not as it seems, and our inner self is like this. Most people confidently claim that they have, or are, a self, and that this self is a continuing and powerful entity; it feels like a conscious agent who lives inside their body, experiences their 'stream of consciousness' (Blackmore 2002) and is the one who decides what to

do. Without such an inner self, many people say, their life would have no meaning. No wonder they are reluctant to give it up.

Yet what we know about the brain, even at the most basic level, appears incompatible with the existence of such an entity. The human brain is a massively parallel system with decisions being taken at multiple levels, at different rates, and in multiple parallel streams all at once. Even though we may feel as though we are a continuous mental entity who is the subject of our experiences and issues instructions from some central command headquarters, there is no central place where this self could live and no means by which it could interfere with all these different on-going processes (Dennett 1991). In other words, we humans are clever decision-making machines that are prone to a number of powerful illusions, in particular the illusion of a persisting inner self that has consciousness and free will (Blackmore 2010, Hood 2012, Metzinger 2009). I am arguing that free will, in this sense, is an illusion.

Proponents of many popular compatibilist arguments often agree in rejecting contra-causal or magical free will. Yet they seem to be trying, at all costs, to rescue some snippet of freedom from the obvious fact that everything that happens in this universe is either caused by something that went before or is a truly random event. Neither of these alternatives provides any room for what most people would call free will. Of course human beings make choices. I am not denying this. Nor am I denying that we can be more or less constrained in the choices available to us, nor that we can be held responsible for some choices and not others. But we should not confuse the decision making powers of a living creature with freedom of the will.

This, it seems to me, has caused a lot of confusion. For example, Dennett's (2003) book *Freedom Evolves* is a wonderful description of how humans and other animals have evolved the ability to make ever more complex choices in ever more complex environments. But these choices are not free in the sense that most people want them to be free. They are the result of the evolved complexity of the perceptual and motor systems that Dennett so ably describes. A more apt title would therefore be *Choice Evolves*.

But I want to leave aside the complexities of philosophical discussion and turn to a different question – a question that arises for anyone who, like me, rejects the notion of contra-causal free will – if there is no free will, how should we live our lives?

There are two possible responses: One is to go on living 'as if' we have free will – in other words, to accept that free will is an illusion and yet choose to remain deluded (not a free choice of course, but one caused by prior events and circumstances). The other is to reject the illusion and aspire to live entirely without free will.

I have chosen the second option, but the first of these is by far the more common. Indeed, when I was lucky enough to be able to interview many leading philosophers and neuroscientists about consciousness, I was amazed by the number who chose to live 'as if'.

Living "As if"

Daniel Wegner is well known as a neuroscientist who believes that free will is an illusion. He has published extensive research on the psychological processes that lead people to believe they have control over their own actions. He claims that "Our sense of being a conscious agent who does things comes at a cost of being technically wrong all the time." 2002 p 342. I asked him how his work in general, and this conclusion in particular, affects the way he lives his life. He replied "I do the 'as if'. And I think almost everybody who's happy and healthy tends to do that."

He argued that our minds produce a sense of virtual agency, the feeling that we are a self who does things and, he said "this ends up being a very useful accounting system and a useful way of keeping apprised of our actions as opposed to those of others, or of the world." (in Blackmore 2005 p 254). According to Wegner, the fact that the sense of agency is illusory doesn't mean that it's any less important since it still guides our subsequent behaviour. In other words, we should carry on living 'as

if we have free will because the illusion is useful and we wouldn't be happy or healthy without it.

Pat Churchland expressed a similar view when I asked her whether she has free will. Although she thinks the human brain is a causal machine, she replied '...you just hold those two things in your mind at the same time.' and added that the brain "has this user illusion - that your decisions are made according to, shall we say, the standard model - that you consciously identify the options, you consciously do an expected utility calculation, you consciously choose, and then at some point later in time, the action's executed. That's a useful user illusion." When I pressed her further by asking "So do you mean that you're happy to think this is an illusion and then just behave as though it's real?" she replied "It's like the illusion with morality. ... it's also very useful for people to have the illusion that these are really true." (in Blackmore 2005 p 62).

The idea that illusions are useful is also found in Daniel Dennett's (1991) description of the self as a "benign user illusion of its own virtual machine". I have argued that the user illusion is actually malign and we might be better to try to throw it out and live without it (Blackmore 1999, 2000).

Some argue not just that the illusion might be useful but that it would be positively dangerous to give it up. According to Susan Greenfield there might be "terrible consequences". She poured scorn on my suggestion that it might be preferable to try to live without it, saying "I believe very much in my own free will. So I can see that you might be, in your Sue Blackmore way, sitting there and saying, "I wonder what she's going to order" and so on, and that might be quite fun; but I don't think that every minute of your life you think, "I wonder what she's going to do". Well, you might if you have schizophrenia, but I think for most people most of the time, you have to assume that other individuals are acting of their own free will, and that you yourself are a cohesive entity." (in Blackmore 2005 p 100-1). In fact, as I told her, I do frequently think "I wonder what she's going to do".

Referring to further "terrible consequences", she said "I think you have to make that choice, because a lot of other things follow: if you don't do that, what do you do with the criminal justice system? For example; if no one has free will, it means that no one should be in prison... how can it provide a deterrent for people if they don't have free will; it's not up to them." (in Blackmore 2005 p 99).

In contrast, I think that the criminal justice system would be stronger and fairer if it were not based on the notion of free will. Certainly we would lose the idea of retribution; of punishing people because they acted badly of their own free will and so deserve to suffer. But people would be sent to prison for other reasons: to keep them away from doing any more harm, for training or rehabilitation, or as a deterrent to them or others in the future. We know that appropriate rewards and punishments can change people's behaviour. So the relevant question would not be 'does this person deserve to be punished?' but 'would this punishment do any good to them, to their victims, or to society in general?'. In many cases, the answer would be 'yes'.

Arguments of the 'my genes made me do it' type would become irrelevant if we agreed that every action everyone carries out is caused by their genes, their memes, and the environments they have lived in. Arguments of the 'I didn't know what I was doing' type would not hinge on whether or not the person was really responsible of his own free will, but on whether any punishment would be effective. For those too young or mentally incapacitated the answer would often be 'no' and there would be no point in putting them in prison. These are complex issues, but in principle there is no reason to believe that our society and its criminal justice system would collapse and crime would run amok if we dropped the idea of free will.

All this assumes that it is possible to give up believing in free will, but some argue that it is not: we do not live "as if" we have free will because the illusion is useful or because giving it up would destroy society or make us mentally ill, but because we cannot give it up. Among my conversationalists, Stuart Hameroff claimed "I have no choice but to believe in free will" and John Searle said "Well, I don't have a choice about that."

Searle referred to his well-known example of ordering food in a restaurant. When the waiter asks for the order 'I cannot say "I'm a determinist, I'll just wait and see what happens," because even that

utterance is only intelligible to me as an exercise of my free will.' He has famously claimed that "We cannot get rid of the conviction that we are free even if we become philosophically convinced that the conviction is wrong." (2004 p 219). To me he added 'when I go to the restaurant and I look at the menu, I might decide "Well, I'll have the spaghetti," but I'm not forced to have the spaghetti; the other options are open to me; I could have done something else. So we can't think it away or pretend that we don't really have free will. ...' (in Blackmore 2005 p 204-5). Of course I disagree with him.

A more surprising example of this view was that of neuroscientist, Kevin O'Regan, who told me that he had wanted to be a robot from childhood. He described poring over a book on neuro-anatomy at the age of ten and wondering how on earth the little neural circuits could give rise to experience. He not only thought of himself as a robot but said, of others, "I knew that they were all robots, and that they were just labouring under the illusion that they weren't." All this might imply that he would also have given up the feeling of having free will, and yet when I asked him "And do you believe you have free will?" he replied "Yes, everybody does. Even robots believe they have free will, even if they don't." (in Blackmore 2005 p 172).

The temptation to compare ourselves with robots is strong, and yet can produce very different responses. Almost the opposite reaction came from philosopher, Paul Churchland, who explained to me that it comforts him to know that brains are non-linear dynamical systems whose behaviour is exquisitely sensitive to infinitesimally small differences and therefore unpredictable. "So one mustn't fear the story science seems to tell, that we are just robots." I was surprised to learn that he needed comforting in the face of what science seems to tell us, and asked him about this "Sure," he said "I am just like everybody else."

But he is not like everybody else. Some scientists simply accept that they have no free will, including Francis Crick, who told me that he agreed with Wegner, not Dennett, and was happy to see his own life as thoroughly deterministic. Christof Koch said "It doesn't bother me too much". Others find it does bother them. It bothers them very much, and yet however useful the illusion might be they cannot go on living "as if" there is free will when they don't believe in it.

I am one of those. For as long as I can remember I have struggled to bring what I have learned as a scientist together with how I live my life.

Rejecting the illusion

It's a cold Sunday evening in December. If I'm going to go down to the village to see the Christmas lights switched on I need to put on my boots and coat now. It's warm by my wood fire. It's cold, windy and drizzling outside. Yet I like to support our village events, perhaps especially when so many people will stay away because of the horrible weather. This simple dilemma is typical of the many small decisions each of us has to make every day. So how do I decide? Do I agonise over the right course of action? Do I exert the freedom of my will? No. I sit by the fire and the arguments, pro and con, come and go. I might even think "I wonder whether she'll go or not?". Then suddenly I am up, reaching for my coat, and heading out of the door into the rain.

This sounds very easy. It is reminiscent of William James' brilliant analysis of how we get out of bed on a freezing morning in a room without a fire. We struggle and remonstrate with ourselves. We keep postponing the act. "Now how do we ever get up under such circumstances?" he asks. "If I may generalize from my own experience, we more often than not get up without any struggle or decision at all. We suddenly find that we have got up." (James 1890 ii 524-5). He goes on to suggest that what prevents us from getting up in the first place is all those 'contradictory or paralyzing suggestions'; the thought of the cold, the delicious warmth of the bed, the duties of the day ahead.

So who or what was responsible for the decision? James goes on to analyse 'that peculiar feeling of inward unrest known as indecision.' (1890 ii p 528). As long as the competing ideas are attended to, we are said to deliberate but when finally the action happens, or else is quenched by its antagonists, '... we are said to decide, or to utter our voluntary fiat in favor of one or the other course. The reinforcing and inhibiting ideas meanwhile are termed the reasons or motives by which the decision is

brought about.' James does not reject the possibility of free will, and his analysis of self is subtle. Yet, one hundred years before Wegner's research, he beautifully exposed the retrospective attributions we routinely give to an imagined self. 'We' are said to deliberate, 'we' decide, and those voluntary fiats, reasons and motives are ours.

Wouldn't it be more honest to accept all these attributions for what they are, drop the notion of the self who decides, and simply let the competing ideas get on with it without interference? Might life even be easier, and making decisions less agonising, if we could? This is what I am suggesting.

Let's take that simple example of going out on a cold night. Living without free will means letting all those 'contradictory or paralyzing suggestions' carry on their battles without thinking they have to be settled by an inner self who ultimately wants one course of action rather than the other. It means treating them as just lots and lots of thoughts about warmth and cold, effort and relaxation, obligation and consequences. Eventually they settle their battle and one action prevails. Then afterwards – and this is perhaps the critical part – it means desisting from making those retrospective attributions of free will. As I walk along the road in the dark and the rain I do not claim that 'I' freely made the decision to go down to the village but simply that the decision was made. Of course that decision has consequences and this person has to accept those consequences and the responsibility that goes with them. But this is not because 'I' made the decision of my own free will. It is because this is the decision that the whole universe came up with for this person under those circumstances.

When I mention this attempt to live without free will people often ask me what I did or how long it took. I have met many people who are trying to do something similar, but I find their questions hard to answer. I have faint recollections of struggling with questions of causality and the impossibility of free will as a child. I remember, much more clearly, having deep and delightful arguments with my then boyfriend, John Dupre, at Oxford when he was writing on 'Weakness of the will'. Then last year, with the sad and unexpected death of my first husband, I took out my diary for 1977 to read about our first meeting. There I had written about our discussions of life, the universe and everything, and about the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* which I was reading at the time. In my diary I described exploring the effects of different kinds of 'wanting', and two weeks after we met I wrote "It occurred to me that I can now understand how it is possible to give up one's will and not become a vegetable. One still wants, but in only this (way of) non-striving, or wanting possession or clinging." This is just one aspect of the task I was apparently already struggling with thirty-five years ago.

This might give some perspective on a task that has lasted most of a lifetime. It has been a slow process. Yet I suspect there may be an entirely different route – perhaps an instantaneous realisation that does away with the illusion all in one go. I shall say more about this later, but for now I want briefly to explore a few aspects of the hard, slow route.

Fear of letting go

Here's a simple question, asked of me again and again by students on my consciousness courses, some of whom found their studies deeply upsetting. As they learned neuroscience and philosophy many of them concluded, intellectually, that free will must be illusory. Yet they feared the consequences of accepting this conclusion in their own lives. So they would ask something like this: "But if I don't have free will why would I ever get up in the morning?" or more generally, "Why would I bother to do anything at all?"

My response (apart from referring them to William James) was to suggest that they try the exercise and see what happens. What happens is that they lie there for some time, some of them getting anxious, others enjoying the lie-in. Then they get bored, or they are desperate for a cup of coffee, or they need to go to the toilet, and so they get up. Once in the bathroom it seems tempting to have a hot shower and then they realise they'd like clean teeth. By then they are hungry and go and make breakfast. And so the day goes on and things get done.

Practicing in this way, motivation itself does not disappear, but the sense of wanting or being motivated begins to change. Indeed, it becomes increasingly obvious that one's motivations do not all

come from 'me', or from some unified inner person or agent; they spring up all over the place in a complex organism living in a complex world. Some of these motivations are available to introspection; they can be thought about, discussed and compared. Others cannot.

We may be tempted to say that the former 'come into consciousness' or that 'I am conscious of them', while the others are 'unconscious'. But this is another temptation that I have been systematically trying to root out because I think it is false. I should say that I am in a tiny minority here as well, although my view is close to that of Dennett who describes the temptation to fall into what he calls 'Cartesian Materialism'; the view that nobody espouses but almost everybody tends to think in terms of ..." (1991 p 144) "the view that there is a crucial finish line or boundary somewhere in the brain, marking a place where the order of arrival equals the order of "presentation" in experience because what happens there is what you are conscious of." (1991 p 107). Like Dennett I reject this view.

I also reject another unstated assumption that permeates the neuroscience of consciousness, and on which the search for the neural correlates of consciousness is based. This is the idea that some brain processes or ideas or thoughts are 'conscious' while others are 'unconscious'. This assumption seems so natural and is so common throughout the neuroscience of consciousness that it is rarely questioned. Yet it implies what I call a 'magic difference'; that some of the things that go on in our heads give rise to, or create, or are, subjective experiences while others are not; that the hard problem of consciousness applies to some neural processes and not others (Blackmore 2010).

This magic difference depends upon the fictional inner self who is supposed to experience some things going on in its body or brain and not experience others. It may seem bizarre to try to give up this very natural illusion, but I think it is intimately related to the task of giving up free will. So I have spent a great deal of time peering into the sensation of what I am conscious of to try to see what is going on. For example, right now I can easily look out of my window at the field opposite, at the shadows on the green grass and the stark outline of the trees against the sky, and think 'right now I am conscious of those shapes and colours'; these are the contents of my consciousness.

What could be wrong with that? One way of investigating this has been through the exercises I set my students each week during my consciousness courses. In the first of twenty weeks they were given the question 'Am I conscious now?' and told to ask themselves this question as many times as they could every day for a week and then report back. Many of them found this incredibly hard, but those who managed it reported that something very odd sometimes happened. It was as though asking the question made them become more conscious, as though they were not quite sure whether they were conscious a moment before or not. This led naturally onto the second week's exercise which was to ask "What was I conscious of a moment ago?".

I practiced this exercise along with my students for many years. I also set myself solitary retreats during which I meditated on this, and other questions, for long periods of time (Blackmore 2011). This persistent personal inquiry led me to the following conclusions: first, 'I' am only conscious when I ask myself whether I am, and second, when I look back into what was happening a moment ago I can recall many things happening but I cannot say which I was conscious of and which not. If I cannot say, then who can?

Those who are searching for the NCCs expect to find an answer, but if my view is correct they never will. The idea that I am conscious of some things and not others depends on the construction of an illusory conscious self. This self is fleetingly constructed when required but most of the time is absent. Part of the illusion is that this self is a persisting entity who is always conscious of something or other. This is the idea that I reject.

These conclusions, reached through personal inquiry, are essentially the same as those I came to intellectually, as described above. They imply that most of the time for most of us, there is no answer to the question 'What was I conscious of at time t?'. There is no fact of the matter about whether a thought, action or brain process was conscious or unconscious. There is no Cartesian Theatre and no magic difference.

So how does one live with this in ordinary life? I am sure there are countless ways, but whenever I find myself thinking 'I am now conscious of the rain pounding on the roof', or "I've just realised I am hungry", I don't imagine that the rain or the hunger have just "entered consciousness" or "become conscious" but rather that the self and what it is supposed to be conscious of have both popped up together. Neither was there a moment ago. If the Cartesian temptation persists, I might repeat the exercise of looking back into the immediate past and seeing, once again, that I have no idea whether I was conscious of the clock ticking or the crackling of the fire, or not. There is no answer because a moment ago I was not thinking about what I was conscious of. So there was no one to be conscious. When I do this, the sense of a continuous conscious self loses some of its power. This is the same self who would, if it existed, have free will, and dismantling this self is part of the task of living without free will.

Morality and responsibility

Letting go of the illusion of free will can be frightening. In addition to the fear of not doing anything at all, there is the fear that if I stop exerting my free will then I (or something else) will make the 'wrong' decisions. What counts as 'right' or 'wrong' may be deeply moral or may be purely selfish. For example, if I decided not to go to the village to see the Christmas lights, I might later hear that it was great fun and so I missed a brilliant evening. In that case I might selfishly conclude that I made the 'wrong' decision, because I would have been happier if I had gone. I might even get cross with myself for being so stupid. Such thoughts often accompany the everyday decisions we all have to make. Should I accept this invitation, eat this or that for lunch, ring that friend back now or later, go on holiday here or there? If I make the wrong choice I will be unhappy, so I should have done otherwise.

It is perhaps obvious that the process of agonising over these decisions, the anger with oneself for getting it wrong, and the potential for regret, are all causes of distress. It is perhaps less obvious that these all stem from the illusion of having free will and that without it they would be lessened or would disappear altogether.

Dan Wegner, although he lives "as if" there is free will, described to me some of the ways his research has affected his own life. "I would have to say that it gives me a sense of peace. There are a whole lot of things that I don't have to worry about controlling because I know that I'm really just a little window on a lovely machinery that's doing lots of things. It also gives, not so much a sense of inevitability, but perhaps a sense of correctness to the behaviours I do – that not all of them have to be chosen; I don't have to worry about every little thing; things will happen well, and have happened well throughout my life, as a result of simply allowing this machinery to do its operation." (in Blackmore 2005 p 255). He went on to describe how this had helped him with a major life decision.

This is the process I'm trying to describe here – allowing that 'lovely machinery' to get on with its decisions and choices without interference from little me.

A deeper and even more upsetting fear is that without free will we might become wicked creatures who would go around harming others, stealing, raping, pillaging or committing whatever other evils one can think of. It's as though people cannot trust themselves to act well unless they keep conscious control over everything they do; as though they think that if they stop believing that 'they' are in control of their body (or whatever part of their brain or body they think of as 'not me') its behaviour will somehow degenerate into evil.

This is surely a recipe for unhappiness. It means falsely dividing oneself into the controller and the controlled; siding with some impulses and not others. The conscious part that is 'me' has to control the unconscious part and so of course battles ensue. When James wrote about getting out of bed, his 'contradictory or paralyzing suggestions' were conscious ones (available to introspection) battling against each other, but here I am talking about the additional fear that if my conscious self does not adjudicate over such battles then the result will be something terribly bad. So to avoid this terrible outcome 'I' must keep a firm control over all my evil impulses and choose good over evil. And for that I have to exert my free will.

This fear, that deep down we are all wicked, is, I suggest, completely unfounded. Yet it is both understandable and widespread. It can be seen in many religions, especially in the Christian doctrine of original sin and the idea that God created us for a purpose and gave us the choice between good and evil. If one asks 'who' has this choice, or 'who' is good or evil, Christians will refer to the human soul or spirit; that non-material, thinking, acting, persisting being that ultimately takes responsibility and in time will be rewarded by going either to heaven or to hell.

How can people believe such things? The deep roots of such beliefs and fears came home to me some years ago when I had a wonderful conversation with my ninety-year-old demented father. I had gone to spend a few days with my parents and one evening was due to give a lecture nearby. So before I left, I sat down by the fire with my Dad.

I should add that my father left school at fifteen, fought in the Second World War, was one of the few survivors of the sinking of the Prince of Wales, and then came home to take over his father's printing business and, as far as I know, never read a book the rest of his life. He was a kind, honest and practical man whom I admired but he did not share my mother's strong Christian faith, nor did he enjoy discussing life, the universe and everything. So when he asked, for the second or third time, "Where did you say you were going dear?" I did not expect to get into a philosophical discussion.

"To Sharpham House." I said "It's a Buddhist centre near Totnes".

"Why are you going there, dear?"

"I'm giving a lecture on free will."

"Free will? What is there to say about that?"

I hesitated, wondering what on earth I could say to my dear old Dad who just about knew who I was but had no idea what day or year it was, and whose entire world consisted of his bed, his fireside chair, and the daily paper he kept on his lap all day even though he could no longer understand it. But I had to say something. So I said that in my lecture I would explain some of the science of how brains work and why human brains have no need of any inner self, or spirit or soul, to direct them. There are parts of the brain that make decisions and organise movements but no centre in which a self or soul could live, and no need for it to do anything if it did. So there's a problem – I seem to be in control but I cannot really be. This, I said, is what I was going to be talking about.

To my complete surprise this set my old Dad alight. He said he was quite sure that his wayward daughter was wrong. "I know I have a soul." he said "It stands to reason. It's me." I asked him what it was made of and he said it was spirit. I asked where it came from, and he said it came from God. I protested that there was no God, and that spirits controlling a body would have to be magic, and he replied with a question I have never forgotten.

"Then why do we want to be good?"

He didn't ask why we are good, or argue about what good is, he simply asked "Why do we want to be good". I went off to my lecture with a far better appreciation of why so many people believe in free will and fear giving it up. And I kept asking myself his question.

So why do we want to be good? Perhaps not everyone does want to be good, but many of us do, and there are good evolutionary reasons why, including the fact that in a social species with reciprocal altruism, the way one person treats another determines how they are treated in return. If you are generous, you are likely to have favours returned. If you are helpful, you gain friends and allies, have a wider social circle, and gain status which translates into future genetic success. Some of our natural desire to be good, or to be thought to be good, is bred into us.

So maybe it is not really so dangerous to give up the illusion of a self in control. Psychologist, Guy Claxton, agrees. "The thing that doesn't happen, but of which people are quite reasonably scared, is

that I get worse. A common elaboration of the belief that control is real ... is that I can, and must control 'myself', and that unless I do, base urges will spill out and I will run amok." Luckily, he says, this is false because I never was split into controller and controlled, although the sense of strain and the self-recrimination were real enough. "So the dreaded mayhem does not happen. I do not take up wholesale rape and pillage and knocking down old ladies just for fun." Instead guilt, shame, embarrassment, self-doubt, fear of failure, and much anxiety fall away, and contrary to expectation I become a better neighbour (Claxton, 1986, p 69).

Where does that leave responsibility? If there is no inner self that exerts control through free will, there is still a whole living being that can take responsibility and can be held responsible by others. And that is sufficient.

Paying attention

When Claxton described giving up control, it was in the context of Buddhism, with its training in meditation and mindfulness, and its concepts of no-self and not-doing. The practice of mindfulness, now becoming increasingly popular in education, therapy and business, as well as in sitting meditation, is all about paying attention. In mindfulness one pays attention to everything happening now, but without discrimination, judgement or response. One simply stays with everything that is. Done with single-minded determination this is a tough task. Our minds just do seem to slip off into speculations about the past or the future, into imagined conversations with other people, into regrets about past actions, into annoyance at things we cannot control, or into wishing to change things for the better. This is how minds are.

Letting go of all this can seem terribly scary. As we stop interfering and allow thoughts just to come and go as they will, we seem to become isolated in a present world which is just as it is, and not under our control. Indeed the sense of being a self who could control anything begins to slip away. With the steady practice of mindfulness, whether in everyday life or in sitting meditation, the mind becomes slower and gentler. It becomes less eager to grasp onto what it thinks is good, and push away what it thinks is bad; to identify with some thoughts or events and not others.

Even more unnerving is that the imagined continuity of self begins to fail. As sounds come and go; as thoughts arise and fall away, a terrible fear can arise – that unless 'I' keep on watching them and connecting one to the next in an ongoing stream of consciousness, then I will disappear. I will fall into the gaps. But then comes the discovery that the continuity was always in the world, and never in that mythical inner self that seemed so strong before. In this, and in many other ways, the simple practice of attending to the present moment can wreak havoc. The self who would have had free will begins to lose its grip.

Although this can be frightening, it has always seemed to me to be a fear worth facing. Many years ago, when intensively practicing mindfulness, I began to notice that more and more decisions simply made themselves. I did not have to interfere with them or tell myself that 'I' was making them. I could let go of the sense of personal control and trust the body I once thought I inhabited to get on with its work unhindered. These decisions included difficult choices that took days to resolve, as well as quick and trivial ones. But one that sticks in my mind was both simple and potentially dangerous.

When I lived in the country near Bristol, my route home took me to a set of traffic lights where I could either turn right along the main road or left into the narrow lanes. Straight ahead was a dry stone wall. One route was a bit faster; the other was slower but prettier. It really did not matter which I took but I would often approach the junction in an agony of indecision – beset by James' 'contradictory or paralyzing suggestions'. The lanes are more fun but what if I meet a herd of cows or a slow tractor? The main road is faster but it uses more fuel. Then one day I simply stopped bothering. I paid attention to the present moment in which the light was red and I was sitting still. Then the light changed and I forget which way she went but it was not into the stone wall.

Has the feeling of having free will completely gone away? For me, no, not entirely. Sometimes the feeling comes back, usually in the form of "Oh, I can't decide whether to accept that invitation, to work

a little longer, to tell that person I” and so on. In these cases I am helped by remembering Dan Dennett’s (2001) remark about the Zombic Hunch (the powerful intuition that there could be beings that act and speak exactly like a normal person but are actually devoid of consciousness). He says of that hunch “I feel it, but I don’t credit it.” So when the feeling of free will comes along, so do those words, along with an acknowledgement that this feeling of having free will is both natural and understandable.

Could it go away completely? Christian mystics describe a final “unselfing” in surrender to the divine will. Surrender to God is said to be the essence of Islam. But the clearest exposition is found in the “sudden and revolutionary change” described in Zen Buddhism, in which the self, with all its fear, clinging, choosing, and deciding, ends.

In his classic book *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts says that “We just decide without having the faintest understanding of how we do it. In fact it is neither voluntary nor involuntary. ... a decision – the freest of my actions – just happens like hiccups inside me or like a bird singing outside me” (Watts 1957 p 141). In the way of Zen one simply walks on, wholeheartedly engaged in every action. Yet “we cannot realize this kind of action until it is clear beyond any shadow of doubt that it is actually impossible to do anything else.” (p 161) This is ‘unmotivated non-volitional functioning’. It is ‘non-action’ or ‘not-doing’. It is how things are because really there is no entity to act; no entity to be either bound or free (Wei Wu Wei 2004).

So could I be completely free of the illusion? Wei Wu Wei suggests “asking yourself whether you are not still looking as from a phenomenal centre that has only an imaginary existence. If so, you will be misled; if not – you will understand at once. (p 163). Clearly, as long as I wish to be free of the illusion, I am not.

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