Scientist Richard Dawkins claims that free will is an illusion. Free Will. Children sometimes have to make sense of decisions that parents make that they do not understand and vice versa. Sometimes, our lack of understanding their decision leads to disagreement, resentment, and blame. These assume that we have free will. Do we have free will and if so, do we always have free will? Are we born with it? Read the following article then read the handout, then read the memo. Then write a journal.

Article:

How Free Is Our Will?

If our psychological traits constrain our choices, then are we truly free?

Posted Nov 25, 2018

### [**Kevin Mitchell, Ph.D.**](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/experts/kevin-mitchell-phd)

*Psychology Today*

When I give talks demonstrating that we all have innate psychological predispositions – traits that influence our behavior across our lifetimes – I often get asked what implications this has for free will. If our behaviors are affected in some way by our genes or by the way our brains are wired, doesn’t that mean that we’re really not that free after all? The answer depends, I think, on the kind of free will you’re after and on an understanding of the mechanisms by which we make choices. And let me say at the outset that we do make choices. The idea that neuroscience has somehow done away with free will altogether or proven that it is an illusion is nonsense. All neuroscience has shown is that when you are making decisions, things are happening in your brain. This is, to put it mildly, not a surprise: Where else would things be happening? And it really has no implications for free will, unless you are a dualist. If you think of the mind as some kind of object that has an existence independent of the brain, then I suppose you might be upset to find that your decisions have a physical basis in brain activity. But if you think of “mind” not as an object but as an activity or process – the brain in action – then, well, seeing the brain in action as you make a decision is just what you’d expect. So, yes, we make choices – really, really. But how free are those choices? How much are they constrained by other things over which we really have no control? How much are they affected by antecedent causes?

In particular, if I have some psychological traits over which I had (and continue to have) no control, and those traits influence my behavior (or at least my behavioral tendencies) then am I really fully in control of my own actions? If someone asks me to a party and I decide not to go, is that because I’m wired to be shy? Perhaps I could have chosen to go, and maybe sometimes I do, but maybe only because I happen to be in a sociable mood or feeling brave that day, and maybe I am not in control of that either.

Well, the first thing to say is that this problem arises no matter the origin of our psychological traits. In my book *INNATE*, I present the evidence that variation in genetics and in the processes of brain development lead to innate psychological differences between people, which affect the trajectory of their lives, influencing their experiences, the way they react to them, and the types of habitual behaviors they develop. But if you’d rather believe—in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence—that all such traits come completely from experience instead, the problem is just as acute.

If we each have real and stable characteristics of temperament and personality, then it doesn’t really matter for this question of free will whether they came from genetics and brain development, or our experiences and environment. In either situation, some antecedent causes have affected the physical structures of our brains in a way that influences our decisions, right now, at this moment. In which case, you could argue, that our will is not so free after all. In one sense, this is trivial – our decisions, in any given situation, are of course affected by our prior experiences and our current goals. The whole point of having a brain is that it lets you learn from the results of actions you have taken in the past in various types of scenarios. That information is then used to predict the outcomes of a range of possible actions that could be taken when such a scenario is encountered again.

I don’t think anyone sees that as undermining our free will – indeed, you could say that choosing between those options, based on what we have learned of the world, in order to further our own goals, is the process of free will in action. It is the idea that the options open to us are constrained somehow by our underlying psychological predispositions that seems to threaten our freedom.

And this does seem to be the case. In the first instance, the range of options that even occur to us – that somehow arise in our brains for consideration – is limited by our personality traits and experiences. Two different people in ostensibly the same situation, with the same primary goal, may nevertheless be choosing from a very different set of possible actions. This is because the interplay of their underlying traits and their experiences across their lives will have created a very different set of additional goals, constraints, and heuristics. For example, two people in a meeting may share a goal of advancing their ideas on some topic under discussion. But one of them may have a conflicting goal – avoid social embarrassment at all costs. This may be due to a natural inclination towards shyness, reinforced by a lifetime of experience, where social interaction is not as intrinsically rewarding as it is for other people, and where the subjective feeling of embarrassment is more acutely felt. Even if it is not consciously perceived, that goal of avoiding embarrassment may act as a powerful constraint on the person’s behavior. They may come home and complain to their partner how they’d wished they’d been brave enough to speak up – instead, stupid Gary who never shuts up dominated the meeting as usual and ended up getting his way. “I wish I had more confidence!”, they might say, conceding that their conscious desires were somehow thwarted by their underlying psychological make-up. This seems to be the type of thing people are worrying about when confronted with the evidence that we really do have lasting psychological traits that influence our behavior. And this worry appears to be more keenly felt when such traits are shown to have a physical basis in the way our brains are wired. It seems to threaten the primacy of our conscious selves in the decision-making process.

Perhaps we’re like a puppet president – making “decisions” about what to do, but only from the highly limited set of options presented to us by the generals and civil servants – limited based on criteria we are never aware of. Or maybe we’re not even really making the decisions at all – perhaps even that stage of the process is dominated by subconscious factors. Maybe we’re like a magician’s stooge, impelled to make certain decisions through influences beyond our apprehension, with only an illusion of control. Personally, I think this goes too far. It can certainly be demonstrated that many of the decisions we make are affected by things of which we are not aware. That does not mean that all the decisions we make are like that. Even if we’re on cognitive autopilot most of the time, that doesn’t mean we can’t ever take the controls. And anyway, being on cognitive autopilot most of the time is not necessarily a bad thing – quite the opposite, in fact. The last thing we would want is to have to make decisions from first principles every time we are doing something. If we had to consciously weigh up every aspect of every decision in every situation we find ourselves in we’d be paralyzed by indecision. And we’d quickly be some other critter’s lunch. Life comes at you fast: Vacillate and die. Instead, most of our behavior is effectively habitual. We learn from experience over our lifetimes that certain behaviors are profitable or appropriate in certain situations – these are the heuristics that subconsciously guide most of our actions. And our behavior is even shaped by our ancestor’s experiences, in the sense that we have inherited a suite of genetically determined behavioral tendencies that were adaptive in the environments and scenarios that our ancestors tended to find themselves in in the past. Now, some people argue that if we can’t make decisions that are completely divorced from any preceding events, effects, or causes, that we are not really completely free at all. But why would we want to do that? Totally free decisions, uninformed by any prior events, would be essentially random and pointless (and highly likely to get you killed sooner or later). Being free – to my mind at least – doesn’t mean making decisions for no reasons, it means making them for your reasons. Indeed, I would argue that this is exactly what is required to allow any kind of continuity of the self. If you were just doing things on a whim all the time, what would it mean to be you? We accrue our habits and beliefs and intentions and goals over our lifetime, and they collectively affect how actions are suggested and evaluated. Whether we are conscious of that is another question. Most of our reasons for doing things are tacit and implicit – they’ve been wired into our nervous systems without our even being aware of them. But they’re still part of us ­– you could argue they’re precisely what makes us us. Even if most of that decision-making happens subconsciously, it’s still you doing it. **Ultimately, whether you think you have free will or not may depend less on the definition of “free will” and more on the definition of “you."** If you identify just as the president does – the decider-in-chief – then maybe you’ll be dismayed at how little control you seem to have or how rarely you really exercise it. (Not never, but maybe less often than your ego might like to think). But that brings us back to a very dualist position, identifying you with only your conscious mind, as if it can somehow be separated from all the underlying workings of your brain. Perhaps it’s more appropriate to think that you really comprise all of the machinery of government, even the bits that the president never sees or is not even aware exists. That machinery is shaped by our shared evolutionary past, by each individual’s genetic heritage, by the particular trajectories of development of their brain, and by their accumulated experiences over their lifetime. Those things all shape the way we tend to behave in any given circumstance. That doesn’t mean we can never exercise deliberative and conscious control over our decisions – just that most of the time we don’t (in part because most of the time we don’t need to). Can we choose not to be a certain way? No, probably not. But can we choose to act in a certain way despite having opposing tendencies? Yes, absolutely — in some circumstances at least. This may be effortful — it may require habits of introspection and a high degree of self-awareness and discipline – but it can clearly be done. In fact, one of the strongest pieces of evidence that we really do have free will is that some people seem to have more of it than others.

Handout:

**Free Will**

*13 Things That Don’t Made Sense* – Michael Brooks

In the spring of 2007, in a basement laboratory in central London, I conducted an experiment with Patrick Haggard, a professor at University College, London's Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience. Haggard held a contraption that looked like an enormous cartoon key over the left side of my skull. When he got the position right, he pressed a foot pedal and my right index finger moved. He slid the key along a bit, and my middle and then third fin­gers twitched. This trick is a favorite tool of neuroscientists. It is called *transcranial magnetic stimulation,* and it uses two electrical coils to create a magnetic field that induces currents in the brain.

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| **The lesson we learn from this is that our minds do not exist separately from the physical material of our bodies.** |

Though it is a scary and entirely unwelcome observation, we are brain-machines.

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| **We do not have what we think of as free will.** |

This inference can be drawn from decades of entirely reproducible ex­periments, and yet it doesn't make sense. As human beings we are utterly convinced of our autonomy, our self-determination, our free will. Almost everyone you talk to will say that such experimental results are anomalous; they don't fit into the framework of our conscious experience. Talk to Patrick Haggard, though, and he will tell you the anomaly, the curiosity, lies in our self-deception, the illusion of free will that we cling to so tightly. Haggard is not alone; most neuroscientists agree with him. But a few are still clinging to free will and casting the experimental results as the anomaly. The stakes in this fight couldn't be higher.

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| **Something about free will certainly doesn't make sense, and the resolution of this anomaly will determine what it means to be a human.** |

Tellmost people they don't have free will, and they will defiantly tell you you're wrong. "Man defends himself from being regarded as an impotent object in the course of the universe,” Albert Einstein wrote in 1931. In 1788 the philosopher Immanuel Kant put the problem of free will on a par with God and immortality. These, he said, were the only three things beyond the power of human intellect. Kant may have been wrong, however; little by little, neuroscientists are learning how to pull aside the curtain. The first person to tear a hole in the illusion of free will was Benjamin Libet. In the late 1970s Libet was discussing free will with the Nobel Prize-winning physiologist John Eccles. Eccles referred to a finding that a brain signal that precedes any voluntary action, called the *readiness potential,* kicks off a second or more before the action. Eccles argued that conscious will must precede a voluntary act by at least a second. Immediately Libet recognized that this was a statement of faith; there was no evidence to back it up. So, he went in search of the evi­dence. Libet took a group of volunteers, wired them up with some scalp and wrist electrodes, and asked them to stare at a clock and flick their wrists whenever they felt like it. Then they were to report when it was that they were first aware of the intention to make the movement.

With the scalp electrodes, Libet measured the steadily climbing signal of the readiness potential. The wrist electrodes gave precise timing for the mus­cle activity. When the subjects gave their timings for awareness of their in­tention to move, the intention always came before the action. So far so good. But that's as far as the good news goes. Libet found that the brain's preparatory work, the readiness potential, preceded conscious in­tention - and by a lot. **The brain was getting ready for the movement up to half a second before it happened**, and on average that was 350 milliseconds before the subject was even aware he was going to move. By the time the subject experienced a conscious intention to move, his brain was going full speed ahead. Whatever he thought he was consciously deciding to do, it wasn't to make that movement. Libet was completely taken aback by this discovery and immediately sought to rescue human free. There is time in between awareness of the intention to act and the action itself, he said, for a veto. We can make a conscious decision to not follow through with the action our brain is about to perform. And thus, the lines were drawn in the battle for the essential nature of humanity. Do we really want science to reduce human behavior to the firings of neurons that are independent of any individual's conscious will? And then there is the issue of right and wrong; we have built our civilizations and reli­gions on the concept that people ought to be held responsible for their actions. Surely, we only want to develop a scientific theory of hu­man will if it legitimizes our concepts of moral responsibility? That was cer­tainly Libet's view - especially since, he felt, his experiment might have been flawed. Libet was right on one count, at least. The idea of free will has certainly not been killed stone dead by neuroscience; the protocols behind Libet's ex­periment are too loose for that conclusion to be drawn. While we talked in his second-floor office, Patrick Haggard put a laptop computer on the table in front of me. I should try a version of Libet's experimental routine, he said. That, more than anything else would show me why Libet's experiment has not yet put a definitive end to free will. In Haggard's version I have to press the F9 key while using a fast-spinning digital stopwatch on the screen to mentally note the time I am "aware of the will" to move my fin­ger. There is plenty of room for experimental error here. What does it even mean; how do I define "aware of the will to move"? Haggard is convinced there is no such thing as free will. The third objection, defining "aware of the will to move,” is problematic, Haggard admits. But, he says, we're arguing semantics now. I'm playing a fool's game to try to close the gap by disputing the details of the experiment. It's there, he says, get used to it. Yes, the experiment has lots of flaws. Yes, it's not the perfect way to pin down the exact nature of voluntary versus involuntary action. But, and he is on the offensive now, what is the alternative? Do I really think I have free will? Do I really think that conscious thought can make my brain do things? Where is this thing, somewhere within my physical brain, that would make my brain leap into action and move my finger?

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| **There's no escaping it, Haggard says: our conscious "intentions" are by-products of something that is already going on. Proving this beyond doubt is difficult, of course.** |

But, in Haggard's mind, one man has come closer than any other. And it is not Benjamin Libet. In the early 1990s Itzhak Fried, a neurosurgeon at Yale University School of Medicine was operating on the brains of patients with severe epilepsy. Their condition was so bad that part of their brains was to be cut out in or­der to stop the debilitating rapid fire of the neurons. To find out which neurons to excise, Fried attached a grid of electrodes to certain regions of the brain's surface; the idea was to monitor the neurons for overactivity.

Besides its clinical use, the situation also provided an unprecedented op­portunity to fire up small regions of the brain with an electrical current to see what happens. It was a mapping opportunity, if you like, something that could help advance our understanding of how the brain works. Fried grasped this opportunity with both hands-and gained some unexpected results. Altogether, Fried and his team stimulated 299 brain sites in thirteen pa­tients; 129 of those sites gave a response. Most of those responses were sim­ply movements of the body. I say *simply,* as if that weren't extraordinary enough. Fried and his team were applying currents to specific regions of the brain and evoking movements, sometimes just one joint would flex or one muscle group in the face would contract.

Sometimes they could evoke a larger response: the patient would adopt a certain posture, extending her neck then rotating her head to the right, for example. That is, by any stan­dards, extraordinary. But it wasn't the most extraordinary thing. What really shocked the researchers was the patients' reports that they were feeling "urges." An urge to move my right arm. An urge to move my right leg inward. An urge to move my right thumb and index finger. And when the researchers ramped up the current a little on each case, that's exactly what happened: the urge turned into the action, the very action the patients had reported wanting to per­form.

All this at the flick of a switch: The researchers had taken over the pa­tients' will, and then - by giving it a bit more juice - they took over their body. I have to admit, watching Haggard move my finger strained my sense of self to the limit. That digit seemed to me like somebody else’s finger. Never­theless, it was instructive: it showed me something more about the Libet ex­periment. Whatever my problems over the phrase "aware of the will to move:' there is a big difference between a movement that comes from your own conscious intention and a movement that comes from-well, seem­ingly, nowhere at all.

It's not a reflex, like straightening your leg after a doctor taps you below the kneecap. It's not like hitting a fast-moving baseball. All those things feel like human capabilities; I might not know how I do them, but at least I know it is me doing them. This was different. It wasn't me. Being Patrick Haggard's puppet was quite a revelation; I became ever more convinced that I don't have free will.

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| **The neuroscience literature attacks the free will delusion from another angle too: neuroscientists have shown time and again that when it comes to intention and control, we are astonishingly self-deceiving.** |

We might be con­vinced that we have free will, but we should treat any and all such inner con­victions with a large dose of skepticism. Daniel Wegner and Thalia Wheatley proved this in 1999 with a cus­tomized version of what they rather entertainingly called an "ordinary household Ouija board.” The pair were based at the University of Virginia at the time and decided to test psychology students' beliefs about their control of their hand movements. The students gained a course credit for taking part; the researchers gained a much-cited classic result.

The experiment involved deception from the start. Each student arrived for the experiment at the same time as someone who was in on the trick. The student believed this insider was also a naive participant and proceeded to work alongside that individual.

The Ouija board was a computer mouse with a square piece of board glued on top; the pair were to place their fingertips on the side of the board closest to them. They were then instructed to move the mouse together, in slow sweeping circles that moved a cursor around a computer screen. The screen showed fifty small toy objects: a swan, a car, a dinosaur, and so on. Every thirty seconds, they were to stop moving the mouse and individually rate how much it was *their* intention to make it stop there.

The scam was complex, involving covert instructions to the insider, but the result was clear. Though all the cursor movements and all the stops were due to the insider, the students reported that the stops were their intention. They believed themselves to be making the decisions when it was clear to everyone else that they weren't. Wegner also carried out related experiments that asked students to "read the unconscious muscle movements" of their student partner. In these stud­ies, the students were under the impression that they and their partners both heard simple questions such as "Is Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States?"

The students had their fingers on top of their partners' fin­gers and had to "feel" their partner's response, then press the appropriate key: yes or no. In reality, the partner - an insider again - heard nothing and thus made no response. The students got the answers right 87 percent of the time - but attributed the answers to the influence of their partner 37 percent of the time. In other words, the correct answers were often produced automati­cally, without conscious contribution. An expectation of their partners' un­conscious movement was enough to undermine the experience of conscious will.

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| **The conclusion? Our perceptions, actions, and intentions are dangerously malleable.** |

We are like small children sitting in front of an arcade race game; even if no money has been put in, and the cars on the screen are rac­ing in demo mode, they grab the steering wheel, move it back and forth, and believe they're driving. Wegner and Wheatley think these kinds of phenom­ena lie behind the skills of many stage entertainers. "Believing that our con­scious thoughts cause our actions is an error based on the illusory experience of will - much like believing that a rabbit has indeed popped out of an empty hat,” they wrote in the July 1999 issue of *American Psychologist.* It is likely that shows involving hypnosis, mind-reading, and illusion all utilize our shaky grip on the real nature of conscious free will. Set things up right, and you can trick people into thinking they are causing something to happen. Alter the setup, and you can trick people into thinking someone else is controlling their behavior. Or that they have carefully watched every part of a sequence of events. Theaters across the world provide the laboratories that prove this idea: under the supervision of showmen and illusionists, thousands of people have moved a glass around a Ouija board with no awareness that they are doing it themselves.

The psychologist and philosopher William James carried out experiments to show just how easy it is for us to bypass our volition. [Volition – the capability of conscious choice and decision and intention.] In 1890 he laid out his findings in *The Principles of Psychology*.

James was the first to realize that not all of our delusions of control are quite as otherworldly as the Ouija board effect. He pointed out that some­thing as simple as getting out of bed in the morning can be similarly prob­lematic. His observation of how hard it is to get up in the morning, however, is rather insightful.

We know what it is to get out of bed on a freezing morning … 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.

It is a startlingly obvious, yet almost universally ignored, example of a lack of conscious control over actions. We've all had the experience, you're lying under the duvet, listening to some ra­dio announcer telling you that it's a beautiful day out there and the traffic is running smoothly. There's no reason to stay in bed. You tell yourself to get up. It doesn't happen. Then, miraculously, thirty sec­onds later, you find you have done it. You don't remember reissuing the command, but there you are, standing and gazing bleary-eyed out into the sunshine. You routinely operate without conscious control.

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| **The idea of free will goes to the center of our sense of self, our autonomy as human beings. Strip us of it, and we are nothing more than animals.** |

Writing in *American Scientist* with Sukhvinder Obhi, Haggard put it an­other way: questioning our free will risks a "philosophical firestorm," Hag­gard knows, however, that the philosophical firestorm will be nothing compared to the legal firestorm that is coming. Brain scanning is becoming extremely sophisticated. It is no longer about finding which area controls the motor functions. Neuroscientists are now identifying the seats of attributes we as­sociate with the person, not the organism. Guilt, shame, regret, loss, impul­sivity - they are all measurable entities.

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| **The anatomy of personality and experience is being reduced to electrical signals.** |

If we find some people are hard-wired for impulsive behavior - and we are beginning to get there - ­how long before it is cited as a legal defense? How long before neuroscien­tists testify that someone cannot be held responsible for the way his brain circuits are connected? David Hodgson, a legal philosopher based in Sydney, Australia, argues, like Libet, that free will is too essential a part of humanity to let our limited scientific understanding remove it at this stage in the endeavor. Hodgson thinks that, though we have some evidence to the contrary at the moment, future experiments may well confirm our free will.

Henry Stapp, a physicist based at the Lawrence Berkeley National Labora­tory in California, cites quantum theory as a source of doubt on the exper­imental evidence of the Libet experiment. In quantum theory, the act of observation can change the experimental conditions, so the results of any experiment that involves self-observation cannot be taken at face value. Such skeptical viewpoints are certainly in the scientific minority. They are based on the scientifically indefensible premise that we simply *must* have free will, and that any experimental results that show otherwise must be flawed. On the other side of the fence, the British psychologist Guy Claxton thinks clinging to free will is akin to denying that the Earth goes around the Sun. Yes, a heliocentric universe is somehow a less comforting worldview; yes, it makes us feel less special. What's more, yes, you can live quite happily without it, as people did for millennia. The only time it really doesn't work is when you want to do something complex, like leave the planet. Similarly, Claxton says, it is only OK to believe you have free will if you don't try to do anything complex like control everything in your life. Stud­ies show that neurotic and psychiatric disorders are more common among those who attempt to keep conscious control of life and suppress its unwel­come quirks. Sanity, paradoxically, may lie in accepting that you are not in control. It's easier said than done. We are ill-equipped to live ultrarational lives; psychologists have repeatedly shown that our ideas of "rational" decision-making are often self-delusion. In one-of the most-cited papers in psychol­ogy, for example, Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson showed that we are unable to explain even why we choose to buy one particular pair of socks over another. Wilson also showed that decisions we think long and hard about are the ones we end up less happy about. So, it's likely that thinking long and hard about free will and making a "rational" decision about it based on the evidence is not even a great idea. If you've got this far in the chapter, you're probably not going to be happy whichever side of the fence you come down on. It might be best to continue with the wishful thinking you began with; the best advice, after all these arguments and demonstra­tions, must surely be: do nothing. Free will may be the one scientific anom­aly that humans would be wise to ignore. For all practical purposes, it makes sense to retain the illusion. Human consciousness, our sense of self and intention, may be nothing more than a by-product of being the enormously complex machines that are our big brained bodies, but it is a useful one, enabling us to deal with a complex en­vironment. What's more, our human cultural arrangements have evolved in parallel with our consciousness, and they rely on the naive view that we are able to direct (and are thus responsible for) our own actions. Philosophers will continue to discuss the implications of the scientific facts, but coldly conceding we are brain-machines and giving up on the notion of personal responsibility will most likely remain too dangerous a move for those having to deal with real-world situations. There is surely too much at stake - too many unforeseeable consequences - to risk dismantling our societal norms for the sake of scientific "truth.” Taking the ultrarational option might get us nowhere - and that would most likely be the best result we could hope for. More likely, the destruction of our legal and cultural frameworks in the light of scientific revelations would take us somewhere we really don't want to go. It is possible that if invoked in legislation, our sci­entific efforts could undermine some of the foundations on which human society has been constructed. The Harvard University psychologist Steven Pinker probably put it best. "Free will is a fictional construction,” he said.” But it has applications in the real world.” In the illusion of free will, it seems we have been equipped with a neurolog­ical sleight of hand that, while contrarational, helps us deal with a complex social and physical environment.

*MEMO:*

*Be miserable. Or motivate yourself. Whatever has to be done,*

*It’s always your choice.*

*-Wayne Dyer-*

*Wisdom transcends rationality.*

*-David Shackleton-*

I believe that free will is an illusion either some or all of the time but that it doesn’t matter because so is time. In *Game of Thrones,* Jamie Lannister states,“If the gods are real and they are just, then why is the world so full of injustice?” Here, he seems to imply that he does not believe in God. If we rule that out, what are we left with? Is there suffering in the world perhaps because we have free will? Free will. In my Religion class, there is a curriculum expectation that specifies: “examine how the use of the gift of free will involves the process of conscience formation through internalizing Christian values.” But what if some of us do and some of us don’t? Stephen Richards once said, “We were all born equal, but where we are in life now is of our own making.” In the fifth season of *Lost,* when Daniel Faraday is trying to explain to Jack that they can, contrary to what he taught earlier, change the future because he realized that he had spent his whole life focusing on the constants and not considering the variables. He says to Jack, “We are the variables.” The main theme of *Lost* is science versus faith and in this episode, Daniel’s parents represent science (the constants) and the belief that what will be will be because it must be. Daniel’s “we are the variables” illustrates that letting things go the way they are “supposed” to won’t fix anything because people are affecting outcomes and events all the time. I have always been, and increasingly so, fascinated by the topic of free will. If I went back in time and did things differently and said things differently, would I have saved a failed relationship(s) or simply prolonged it? Here’s one reason why I believe in free will: In early 2017, my Acer laptop engaged in a Windows update. As you know, Windows (like your smart phone) updates whether you want it to or not (usually not). It’s an unethical “feature” that contributes to the de-evolution of your device speeding up the process of you buying a new device, or so it seems obvious to me. On this particular update, for whatever odd and mysteriously inexplicable reason, now each time the laptop was done charging, it would beep eternally so you would have to unplug the laptop to shut it up; leaving it unplugged was no longer a viable option. The screen would dim each time it beeped as well. And now, instead of you getting a pop-up of some sort, warning you when the battery is low, the computer would just simply shut down abruptly almost always ensuring that you lost work. I initially was as frustrated as Acer and Windows wanted me to be but then I quickly *adapted.* I put the laptop on mute and left it plugged in. Every time that the screen dimmed (i.e., every apr. 4 minutes), I would say a positive affirmation. This lasted for a couple of months and then at some point there was another Windows update that I gladly welcomed because it stopped beeping.

Restorative Justice. Kumbiya. If only there was more of this in our world, there would be less wars and less conflicts all around. At a Bernie Sanders rally (March 25th, 2016), Bernie was talking, and a bird landed on his podium. It stayed there and looked at him for a few moments and flew away at which point Bernie said: “I think we just saw something symbolic… It didn’t look like it, but that bird was a dove telling us that it’s time for world peace. No more wars!!” Birds and anything we would consider majestic seem to have a way of reminding us that our world is dysfunctional. One of my favorite lines from *The Magic Strings of Frankie Presto* by Mitch Albom is (from the perspective of music):

“You humans are always locking each other away. Cells. Dungeons. Some of your earliest jails were sewers, where men sloshed in their own waste. No other creature has this arrogance- to confine its own. Could you imagine a bird imprisoning another bird? A horse jailing a horse? As a free form of expression, I will never understand it. I can only say that some of my saddest sounds have been heard in such places. A song inside a cage is never a song. It is a plea.”

By the way, a few weeks before the Bernie Sanders bird encounter, in an interview on *CNN,* Sanders said: “We are in it together as human beings. All religions equal ‘Do unto others as you would have done unto you…’ When I hurt, you hurt, when your children hurt, I hurt. That starving child is my child.”

We can only take advantage of free will in a state outside of the hypnotic state that most people are in whereby they come up with plausible narratives to explain what is going on in the world and in their life not realizing that these are all-too-often, negative affirmations. Furthermore, “It would be a violation of our free will for God to rearrange our thoughts without our consciously having asked Him to do so, but once we ask, our prayers are answered. Our suffering having been surrendered, an alchemical healing process begins immediately.” That powerfully written quote comes from someone I believe to be an expert on free will, Marianne Williamson. It’s true, we often hold on to the past and express our bitterness about something in negative ways we soon after regret. A possible example being someone posts something on Facebook that you strongly disagree with and you go overboard on your retorts that are laced with a harsh tone and some direct personal insults in the form of name-calling alienating you and serving to do anything but win your argument. You think, “why would I say such things, that’s not really me. It’s almost as if I am possessed.” We can follow through on this analogy by suspending our disbelief for a moment and considering that if there is such a thing as literal possession, then does the person possessed have free will? Most people would say no but only if they are assuming that all people that would or could ever be possessed are possessed against their will and are hurting inside in total disagreement with the demon or the devil or who or whatever is controlling them when in fact such a far-out supernatural belief can’t possibly preclude the possibility that there could be some, shall we call them, “perfect possessions” whereby the host is content to be possessed because the host has some very warped views to go along with a lot of hate that they have inside of them that puts them on the same page as the demon or devil or whatever it is… Now if you don’t believe that possessions exist, you can go back and look at it as a metaphor. Do you feel disappointment in yourself after you have restored to name-calling or do you seem to love it?

On June 21, 2015, on *Coast to Coast AM*, George Knapp interviewed Dr. Ruth Kastner. They discussed free will in the context of quantum physics. Keep in mind that classical physics was based on a mechanistic model, in which things could be taken apart and understood like a clock, with precise laws that described their workings. However, when it came to understanding things on the micro scale, such as the atom, the mechanical model did not hold up, and quantum physics was developed as a way to fathom the behavior of tiny particles. According to Kastner, quantum physics suggests that our space-time world (all physical reality) could be thought of like the tip of an iceberg, but there's also a huge submerged portion of the iceberg that remains hidden, yet is necessary for space-time formation. “In a sense, we're only experiencing a projection of this larger reality”, she said. Kastner believes that events are brought about from the quantum realm, and in that process, we're actually creating space-time, and an evolving future that doesn't have to exist yet, which means there's no fate or preordained events in our lives. So, there you have it, we are co-creators and thus have free will. But things are not that simple. When I consider the lack of protest in the world over climate, war, poverty, and injustice it makes me question free will. If we had free will, would we not be exercising our right to protest against the horrible corruption in the world? Some of us are but the vast majority of people simply do not participate in protest. I think that there must be a better explanation than lack of free will to account for this. For instance, on Dec.30, 2016, on *Coast to Coast AM,* historian, researcher, and specialist in esoterica, Peter Levenda, discussed the techniques of persuasion and mind control and how the methods have evolved to be used on a large scale. Levenda said that he has "always been fascinated by the intersection between politics and religion" and pointed out that one of the ultimate expressions of this idea was the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. He believes that they had all the trappings of a cult, even though they were not traditionally religious. He thinks that there are definite parallels between the Nazis and the new wave of terrorist organizations such as ISIS. He described methods of political or spiritual conversions of individuals and groups and how the techniques are the same whether used by Nazis, terrorist organizations, or cult leaders like Charles Manson. Levenda says that this form of mind control bypasses the intellect and "goes straight to the unconscious." He described the method as causing the victim to undergo stress or some degree of nervous tension and increasing it until the situation is almost unbearable. At that point, the cult leader or whoever is controlling the situation can offer an answer or path of relief so that the target is bound emotionally to them or their ideology. Levenda believes that techniques borrowed from western occult practices are now being subjected to "very sober academic work" in order to use the information to control large segments of the population, which is easier in an era of social media. Think of Agent Fox Mulder from an *X-Files* episode called “Monday.” It is one of my all-time favorite episodes. It’s the *X-Files* version of *Groundhound Day.* It’s about a day that keeps repeating itself over and over again and only one character realizes that it’s happening and she desperately wants to change the outcome of the day and tries everything within her power to do so, although by the end of the episode, after an unspecified amount of time (if I had to guess, I’d say a year), Mulder also clues-in that the day is stuck in a temporal loop. I’m not suggesting that this actually happens in our universe, but the episode reaches a philosophical climax when Mulder experiences déjà vu which sparks the following conversation with Agent Dana Scully:

MULDER (after telling Skully that his day got off to a bad start waking up to a waterbed leak): Scully, did you ever have one of those days you wish you could rewind and start all over again from the beginning?

SCULLY: Yes. Frequently. But, I mean, who's … who's to say that if you did rewind it and start over again that it wouldn't end up exactly the same way?

MULDER: So you think it's all just fate? We have no free will?

SCULLY: No, I think that we're free to be the people that we are -- good, bad or indifferent. I think that it's our character that determines our fate.

MULDER: And all the rest is just preordained? I don't buy that. There's too many variables. Too many forks in the road.

SCULLY: Since when did you get a waterbed?

MULDER: I might just as easily not have a waterbed then I'd be on time for this meeting. You might just as easily have stayed in medicine and not gone into the FBI, and then we would never have met. Blah, blah, blah...

SCULLY: Fate.

MULDER: Free will. With every choice, you change your fate… It's a long story but I had the distinct sensation that I had lived that moment before. I wonder what it means.

SCULLY: Mulder, I don't see why it has to mean anything.

MULDER: Well, you know, some Freudians believe the déjà vu phenomenon to be repressed memories escaping the unconscious. That it represents a desire to, uh, have a second chance to set things right.

SCULLY: Set what kind of things right?

MULDER: Whatever's wrong.

SCULLY: Mulder, it's more likely that we're talking about simple neurochemistry -- a glitch in the brain's ability to process recognition and memory. Doesn't mean that the memory's authentic.

MULDER: Yeah? Well, but what if it were?

SCULLY: What if you'd lived this moment before and now you're living it again?

MULDER: Yeah -- so that I could right some wrong or change fate…

In the above episode, the antagonist is a bank robber. He loses his job, robs a bank, and it ends badly with the death of his girlfriend. Had he not lost his job, would he ever have broken the law? Perhaps not, and yet not everyone that loses their job breaks the law. Yet still, there is an obvious correlation between unemployment and crime rates. I know of someone who was abused when he was young and he went on to become addicted to drugs. Would he not have been addicted to drugs had he not been abused? Any discussion of free will must also be a discussion in reality. Between 2012 and 2018, the term “The Mandela Effect” entered our lexicon. *The X-Files* dedicated an episode to it, Season 11, episode 4 (Jan.24th, 2018). I would say that in theory, if you have free will, you can change reality. And if one person can change reality, then there should be residual evidence that reality has changed. I, like some of you, remember a film called *Interview with A Vampire* but history tells us that we would be wrong, it was called *Interview with THE Vampire.* Just for fun, here are five other examples from my memory: 1) In *Filed of Dreams,* I could have sworn the most famous line was, “If you build it… they will come.” It isn’t. It is, “If you build it, he will come.” I show it every year to my ENG4C class and now, a year or so after first being surprised by this so-called Mandela Effect, I vividly remember it always being “If you build it, *he* will come.” 2) In *Forest Gump* I vividly recall the most famous line being, “Life is like a box of chocolates.” It is actually, “Life was like a box of chocolates.” 3) On 9/11, when the second plane hit, I clearly remember that George W. Bush was in a Florida classroom reading a book called “My Pet Goat” and it was upside down. That memory is incorrect. He was reading a book called “The Pet Goat” and it was right-side-up. 4) I had always thought that the last three words in the Queen song “We are the Champions” was, “…of the world.” In actuality, the last three words are, “…are the champions.” And 5) I sincerely remember that C3PO’s entire body in *Star Wars* (episodes IV-VI) was gold as opposed to the actual appearance of half of one leg being silver… I am not sure if free will extends to altering reality in any significant way (the above examples are all minor)- save in terms of yourself. And if it’s a solitary exercise, can one’s perception be described as reality? Ultimately, you can only live in each single moment (pretty slow going). At the end of the day, mindfulness and positivity count for a lot.

Scully, in Season 7, episode 17 of *The X-Files* said,

"Time passes in moments. Moments, which rushing past, define the path of a life, just as surely as they lead towards its end. How rarely do we stop to examine that path? To see the reason why all things happen. To consider whether the path we take in life is our own making, or simply one into which we drift with eyes closed. But what if we could stop? Pause to take stock of each precious moment before it passes. Might we then see the endless forks in the road that have shaped a life, and seeing those choices choose another path?"

Since negative thoughts resonate with negative things, what if most people have it backwards and although are goal-orientated, it is not enough because they think that if they lose weight or have more money they will activate happiness but what are they creating with that vibration which is not loving and not in harmony? Well, it would seem to me that they are not subjecting themselves to free will. They are not following their bliss. They could be happy and joyous first and focus on the things that they love doing and then would come the goals. We are talking about true freedom here. As I write this, I feel quite free. What gets in the way of freedom is focusing on things that are disconnected from happiness. Whatever you practice now you will be in the future. If you are free and grateful, you will be free and grateful. And if you are not, you won’t be. What gets in the way of our focus, for most people like myself, it’s a bunch of small things put together (excess weight and associated health problems, financial problems, relationship problems, fear, disappointment, jealousy (etc.). For some people, it’s one big thing. I know three people in my life that are alcoholics who continue to drink. These are three people that can have another drink and they can have one drink, but the second they start their third drink, their eyes change, their speech completely changes, and they say some strange and harsh things. They know what it’s like to self-destruct while drunk. Their drinking can be a prison. But the only prison is our mind. Whether it’s a bunch of things or one big thing imprisoning us, gratitude is a result of appreciating and is the ultimate counter to those things that deter and block. Either we have free will or we don’t or we have some to varying degrees based on mindset. It is a fascinating topic and this is why I am drawn to the free will v. determinism type themes we see in *The X-Files, Lost, The Leftovers,* and films such as *Knowing.*

I had a former student who took my philosophy class say to me recently,

“In terms of humans having free will, that we are able to conceptualize free will is proof that we have it. If we didn't have free will, whatever or whoever was ‘controlling’ us or had chosen our destiny for us wouldn't have given us that ability. As we've learned from every sci-fi movie ever, once a species discovers its being controlled or isn't living in the real world, it rebels. Our creator or creative force wouldn't give us a shot at rebelling and realizing we weren't free.”

I am always impressed when a student or former student takes a class discussion and then someday comes back to it with their own new points. That’s what it’s all about. I guess she was arguing that we have free will but if we have free will then there can’t be a God. Of course the argument was based on science fiction. Who can say for sure whether or not an AI android that I create with free will- will rebel against me and other humans?

Do you have free will if you have mental health issues? What about if you are starving? What about if you are enslaved or suppressed by a government? Such a government might ban this current journal topic discussion; they might want to if they knew for instance that it meant that oligarchy systems and the current type of capitalism in place would become obsolete. I first realized this thought a few years ago while watching an old episode of *X-Files* where Mulder, although applying this logic to alien cover-ups, said:

“We wanted to believe. We wanted to call out. On August 20th and September 5th 1977, two spacecraft were launched from the Kennedy Space Flight Center, Florida; they were called Voyager. Each one carries a message. A gold-plated record depicting images, music, and sounds of our planet, arranged so that it may be understood if ever intercepted by a technologically mature extraterrestrial civilization. Thirteen years after its launch, Voyager I passed the orbital plane of Neptune, and essentially left our solar system. Within that time, there were no further messages sent, nor are any planned. We wanted to listen. On October 12th 1992, NASA initiated the high resolution microwave survey - a decade long search by radio telescopes scanning 10 million frequencies for any transmission by extraterrestrial intelligence. Less than one year later, first term Nevada senator Richard Bryan successfully championed an amendment which terminated the project. I wanted to believe, but the tools had been taken away. The X-Files had been shut down. They closed our eyes, our voices have been silenced, our ears now deaf to the realms of extreme possibilities" (Season 2, Episode 1, "Little Green Men").

Does free will or fate affect how good or bad we are in our life? And what constitutes “good” or “bad.” When it aired, I watched a TV show called *Lucifer.* The concept is that the Devil has retired and is living it up in LA as a human, albeit immortal. An angel of God keeps warning him to return to Hell lest he seriously disrupt the balance of the universe and trigger a new war between Heaven and Hell. Lucifer’s exposure to humans leads to him becoming merciful just as all humans are capable of becoming, presumably under the right conditions, but Lucifer seems to be less mature and less wise than God in his understanding of justice. Lucifer wants to punish people who “deserve” it. Lucifer Morningstar has retired from being Lord of the Underworld but before that, he was an angle in Heaven. He takes issue to something in God’s creation which started out perfect until Lucifer does something to get him consigned to Hell leaving him thinking that God is to blame for his demise and that God’s Plan A was better than his Plan B. But what if from God’s perspective, Plan B and A are one in the same?

In The Tragically Hip album “Now for Plan A” there is a song called “Now for Plan A.”

Here are some of the lyrics:

*…No matter how high or how rough*

*Nothing short of everything's enough*

*In your face the endless patience*

*The fleeting nature of life on display*

*(And nothing short of everything)*

*(Nothing short of everything)*

*I'll stay till the wisteria fades*

*The way it falls all over L.A.*

*(Nothing short of everything)*

*No matter how wide or how rough*

Not a lot of lyrics to go on here but if the album is named after this song, I know there is deep relevant meaning to be found. For example, we're all trying to reconjure the original premise, the original plan, when we do something good, when we find a nice plateau feeling upbeat like when we were children, spending our whole life shying away from things some of which we ought to and some of which if we didn’t ignore we could get to feel like a child. It feels good to be that kid again. You can always go to plan A… which doesn't exist. I remember discussing these lyrics with co-workers once and the conversation got very intellectual and none of these colleagues were Tragically Hip fans which made it even more interesting and I said at one point that "This dialogue that we have entered into has somehow made me smarter than I actually am temporarily." Deep discussions in groups can be very enlightening and it was your free will that led to you talking in that group. Anyways, the conclusion was that a) scientific reductionism doesn't have it right...what we are talking about here is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.  When we enter this collective dialogue, we become greater than individual voices...the conversation itself has greater value as a result. And b) the feeling of doing something good resonates with us...it causes "good vibration" Children always have that feeling because they have not learned the social filters that block this good vibration out....

**Dr. Dan Segal once said: “It's very exciting to understand (and to teach our kids) that we can use our minds to take control of our lives.”** What he meant is that not only do we have free will but more than that, by directing our attention, we can go from being influenced by factors within and around us to influencing them. He says, “We can shift our focus so that we are no longer victims of forces seemingly beyond our control, but active participants in the process of deciding and affecting how we think and feel.” In other words, we have free will *and* we have creative control. We waste opportunities to use the benefits of that free will and creative control when we let ourselves get fixated on simple negative things. At the Hay House World Summit in 2013, Bruce Lipton talked about how taking things personally is a source of stress. It certainly is. How do we change that conditioning though? We need a mindful viewpoint that cuts through stress. He used the following analogy: The mind is the show. There are two minds. They are not the same, they are connected. The conscious mind= the foundation of our spirit connected to our personal identity, this contains wishes and desire, it is creative, positive thinking is creative thinking, but if it is not set in the present, we default into programs created in the subconscious data base, unfortunately. A child up to the age of 7, is recording everything it sees (download mode). Observe, record how your mother behaves and communicates etc.… Behaviours to how to respond to life are learned from other people, not you. Not you. So does this fly in the face of free will? If someone is hypnotized, are they deprived of free will? In fact, from age 0-7, you get hypnotized. Lipton says: “Tapes of other peoples programs is the self-sabotaging subconscious! 95% of the day we operate from the pre-programmed data base of other people. These may not support any of our desires. **During that first 6-7 years a child has to figure out who they are so they download what other people say about them!” So, parents tend to coach-parent without realizing that the child can’t put “Do better” (etc.) into context. “Do better”= “not good enough” and that’s not ideal programing**. Still, we have free will. Because no matter who influences us in a negative way directly or indirectly, we can undo any harm. A good deal of our personality is determined by the third trimester before we are born. The fetus experiences what the mother does. When the mother is happy the fetus is happy whereas fear or being upset gets reflected in the fetus as well. Patterns of emotions are learned. Lipton went on to talk about his book *The Honeymoon Effect* which shows that science has found that when you fall in love, your conscious mind goes from 5% in control to 95%! That’s a lot of free will if you ask me. You manifest desires here and life feels like Heaven on Earth!