

Free Will: Hail and Farewell

James A. Montanye
Independent scholar, Falls Church, VA
jmont.ccg@gmail.com

This essay traces the evolution of the *free will* concept, from Plato to the present. It examines interpretations offered by theologians, political philosophers, philosophers of mind and consciousness, neuroscientists, evolutionists, legal scholars, and economists. The essay illuminates the concept's instrumental use as an artifice for manipulating behavioral adaptations to the scarcity of economic resources. Macroeconomic and ngram data reveal these manipulations as having locked Western civilization into centuries of social and economic stagnation.

Keywords: free will, consciousness, economics, prosperity, scarcity, competition, neuroscience, compatibilism, incompatibilism, ngrams

“The persistence of the traditional free will problem in philosophy seems to me something of a scandal. After all these centuries of writing about free will, it does not seem to me that we have made very much progress.”

John Searle (2007, 37)

“A flood of ink has been spilled, especially in the modern era, on how to understand the concept of being able to do otherwise.”

Timothy O'Connor (2016)

“...the whole arcane issue about free will is a miscast concept, based on social and psychological beliefs held at particular times in human history that have not been borne out and/or are at odds with modern scientific knowledge about the nature of our universe.”

Michael Gazzaniga (2011, 219)

“...if we no longer entertain the luxury of a belief in the ‘magic of the soul,’ then there is little else to offer in support of the concept of free will.”

Anthony Cashmore (2010, 1)

1. Introduction

Speculation about the nature, meaning, and purpose of *free will*—mankind’s nagging sense of conscious volition and agency—spans not only millennia, but also the breadth of philosophical and theological imagination, scientific investigation, and political economy.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes free will as being “a philosophical term of art for a particular sort of capacity of rational agents to choose a course of action from among various alternatives. Which sort is the free will sort is what all the fuss is about. And what a fuss it has been: philosophers have debated this question for over two millennia, and just about every major philosopher has had something to say about it” (O’Connor 2016). Commentaries run the gamut, from condemnation to praise. Plato regarded unfettered passion and will as evil forces because they detract from society’s perfect form. St. Augustine and the medieval Church, along with the Nineteenth Century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, imagined passion and the will as being the source of the world’s evil. Authoritarian/totalitarian philosophers—German theists and nationalistic historicists in particular—regarded many presumed “evils” (e.g., war) as being goods instead. Conversely, the influential political philosopher Baron de Montesquieu viewed passion and will as being counter-forces to evil: “And it is fortunate for men to be in a situation in which, though their passions may prompt them to be wicked, they nevertheless have an interest in not being so” (quoted in Hirschman 2013 [1977], 73). “Interests” in Montesquieu’s sense could be moral, spiritual, social, and political, as well as pecuniary.

The noted philosopher John Searle spoke for many philosophers when arguing that “[t]he problem of free will, in short, is how can such a thing exist? How can there exist genuinely free actions in a world where all events, at least at the macro level, apparently have causally sufficient antecedent conditions? ... we are nowhere remotely near to having a solution. I can give you a pretty good account of consciousness, intentionality, speech acts and the ontology of society but I do not know how to solve the problem of free will” (Searle 2007, 10–11). The philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris asserts deterministically that “[f]ree will is an illusion. ... Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no conscious control. We do not have the freedom we think we have. ... You can do what you decide to do—but you cannot decide what you will decide to do” (Harris 2012, 5; 38).

The writer Dan Barker characterizes free will by analogy, calling it “a beautiful illusion” resulting from the convergence of philosophy and neuroscience: “Free will is not a scientific truth. It is a social truth ... Although we talk about ‘having’ free will, it is not something that we have; it is something we experience. Free will is not the reason for ... credit or blame: it is the result of the need to assign credit or blame” (Barker 2018, 119; 80). The U.S. Supreme Court agrees in part with Barker’s assessment (and similarly echoes Aquinas): “A ‘universal and persistent’ foundation stone in our system of law, and particularly in our approach to punishment, sentencing, and incarceration, is the ‘belief in freedom of the human will and a consequent ability and duty of the normal individual to choose between good and evil’” (*United States v. Grayson*, 338 U.S. 41, 52 [1978], case citations omitted).

Scholarly philosophical and scientific commentaries fall under three principal heads (Harris 2012, 15–26). Each head accepts *a priori* that human passion, will, and consciousness are produced by the brain’s physical (material) processes, and not by some metaphysical ghost lurking within the machine. *Determinists*, like Harris, argue that human behavior is fully determined by background causes; free will therefore is merely an illusion. *Libertarians* argue that something in addition to determinism—some emergent, conscious, and semi-autonomous process resembling Freud’s ego and id—somehow places “us” rather than our material brains in charge. A familiar libertarian mantra/koan characterizes the human will and consciousness as physical processes that cannot be reduced to physics. These two paradigms are mutually incompatible, and so determinists and libertarians are labeled *incompatibilists*.

Compatibilists, by comparison, reconcile free will and determinism by arguing that the will is irreducibly coextensive with the individual, and that both the will and the individual are “free” so long as neither is constrained, directed, or otherwise perturbed by opposing exogenous forces. Compatibilism often entails a “moral fallacy”—a “reverse naturalistic fallacy”—by supposing that what *ought* to be true in fact *is* true. The philosopher Daniel Dennett’s nuanced compatibilistic argument concludes, along this line, that “[w]e can have free will and science too” (Dennett 2015 [1984], 21; see also Dennett 2003). His analysis turns upon a wishful concern for the foundations of moral responsibility, and also upon a desire “to see how something we want to believe could be possible. ... I take my project ... to be an exercise in [this] brand of explanation” (54). For Dennett, “[t]he varieties of free will worth wanting are those—if there are any—that will secure for us our dignity and responsibility. The argument I will give for this view is, of necessity, an argument to the effect that it is *rational* for us to esteem free will and covet responsibility. No other sort of argument could be a *defense* of those concepts...” (167; 169).

To this end, Dennett argues that

Having good reasons for wanting free will is not, of course, having good reasons for believing one has free will. It seems to be, however, that having good reasons for wanting free will *is* having good reasons for trying to get oneself to believe one has it. For it is very likely, as we have seen, that believing that one has free will is itself one of the necessary conditions: an agent who enjoyed the other necessary conditions for free will—rationality, and the capacity for higher order self-control and self-reflection—but who had been hoodwinked into believing he lacked free will would be almost as incapacitated for free, responsible choice by that belief as by the lack of any of the other necessary conditions. ... What we want when we want free will is power to decide our courses of action, and to decide them wisely, in the light of our expectations and desires. We want to be in control of ourselves, and not under the control of others. We want to be agents, capable of initiating, and taking responsibility for, projects and deeds. All this is ours, I have tried to show, as a natural product of our biological endowment, extended and enhanced by our initiation into society (183–184).

Dennett concludes, therefore, that “free will is not an illusion, not even an irrepressible and life enhancing illusion. ... Nothing we have learned from the neurosciences jeopardizes this kind of free will (184; 204).

Other influential camps of free will apologists exist as well. Theologians debate whether free will is compatible with *predeterminism* (divine foreknowledge), which paradoxically, and *pace* Aquinas’ theological distinction between primary and secondary causes, denies the logical possibility of an omniscient God possessing free will. Free-spirited thinkers, who can be labeled as behavioral *libertines*, conflate free *will* with freedom of individual *action* when asserting an allegedly natural right to live existentially “authentic” (Sartre’s term, following Heidegger) lives. Yet another camp, which can be called behavioral *cyberneticists*, invoke free will as justification for social norms and laws.

This essay elides the philosophical paradoxes and scientific lacunae that characterize the free-will debate, cutting through the tangled knot rather than endeavoring to unweave it. To this end, the essay offers a paradigmatic understanding of free will’s “final cause”—i.e., the “why”—by examining its pragmatic cash value. The essay establishes that the free-will concept was created, maintained, and wielded as a social artifice—an effective bit of moral, political, and theistic philosophy used to justify mischievous and often perverted ends. The concept became a thing in itself only as philosophers sought to discover deep moral meaning in it while simultaneously pouring deep meaning into it; seeking to change the world rather than merely interpreting it. To this end the human will has been artfully mischaracterized as a source of evil both to justify authoritarian and totalitarian social policies, and as proof of God’s existence and significance. Neuroscientists have responded by demonstrating that free will, like religion, has no material basis in scientific fact.

This essay illuminates the adverse social and economic consequences that the free-will concept has justified over the span of two millennia. These justifications are judged by their results rather than by their elegance and ostensible good intentions which, prior to the advent of modern secular democracy, were individually and socially detrimental on balance. The analysis is framed by mankind’s joint and several efforts to overcome the fundamental economic problem of material resource *scarcity*—i.e., the reality that too few resources are available to satisfy every individual’s desire to possess and consume more of everything. Scarcity is the reason why consumers are obliged to pay prices, and why producers are obliged to bear costs. Classical theodicy—literally, “justifying God” (see Leibniz 1908 [1714], 284–294; 299–307)—reduces to the economic problem of resource scarcity. The human will represents Mankind’s fundamental ability to choose (i.e., to trade off)—somehow, if not *otherwise*—among competing alternatives in order to extract value from scarcity.

The section below places the free-will concept in context and perspective. The next section begins tracing its instrumental origins. The following section joins the free will debate with the complementary and contemporaneous concepts of ambition and avarice. The social, political, and economic consequences of instrumental free-will justifications are considered in the penultimate section. The essay concludes in the final section.

2. Context and Perspective

This section of the essay sketches the metes and bounds of the free-will debate's neurological, philosophical, political, behavioral, and economics dimensions. The section concludes with a brief summary.

Neuroscience

The hardest of the so-called “hard determinists” hold that the human brain operates essentially as a clockwork mechanism whose outputs are predictable in theory notwithstanding the brain's material complexity and its emergent properties of will and consciousness. Free will by this light is a meaningless and misleading illusion.

Biologist Anthony Cashmore exemplifies this view: “... the simple but crucial point is that any action, as “free” as it may appear, simply reflects the genetics of the organism and the environmental history, right up to some fraction of a microsecond before any action” (Cashmore 2010, 1). Determinists regard free will as “an idea that arose before we knew all this stuff about how the brain works, and now we should get rid of it” (Gazzaniga 2011, 129). The distinguished neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga highlights some wrinkles in deterministic thinking, but nevertheless agrees that “free will is a miscast concept [that is not] borne out and/or [is] at odds with modern scientific knowledge” (219). Gazzaniga qualifies hard determinism by noting the human brain's *eusocial* (highly social) nature evolved to operate in concert with other human brains: “The social group constrains individual behavior, and individual behavior shapes the type of social group that evolves. This plays back to our idea of individual behavior not being solely the product of an isolated, deterministic brain but being affected by the social group” (157; see also Wilson 2012). If so, then the will can be neither entirely free nor self-directed.

Searle's philosophical criticism of determinism is both general and independent of Gazzaniga's “social brain” consideration: “In the case of free will the problem is that we think explanations of natural phenomena should be completely deterministic. [... which explains] why it is that we have made so little progress over our philosophical ancestors” (Searle 2007, 38–39). Searle argues that deterministic orthodoxy manifests science's inability to disentangle complex webs of causal necessity.

Neuroscience has discovered that the phenomenon of will operates substantially, if not entirely, at the level of the unconscious mind. Conscious awareness of the will's operation arises only after the fact. Behavioral libertarians argue that this *ex post* awareness provides an opportunity for the conscious mind to quash unconscious choices before action occurs, a process dubbed “free nil,” and “free won't.” This claim rests upon experimental evidence that has been interpreted as showing conscious control over some motor functions (see Gazzaniga 2011, 199–200). Overall, however, the libertarians' strong claim does not square with the bulk of neuroscientific understanding.

Apprehending the brain's structure as a layered collection of indefinitely many specialized modules—perhaps upwards of one million, each clamoring for the attention of higher-level integrator and interpreter modules—appears to be the key for penetrating the phenomena of consciousness and the illusion of free will. By Gazzaniga's lights, “[w]hile

it is not intuitive to think that our consciousness emanates from several independent sources, this appears to be the brain's design. Once this concept is fully grasped, the true challenge will be to understand how the design principles of the brain allow for consciousness to emerge in this manner. This is the future challenge for brain science" (Gazzaniga 2018, 231). Until this challenge is met, scholars of all stripes will remain at liberty to address the free-will puzzle in whatever manner best suits their disciplines, interests, and objectives. Their theories, hypothesis, and explanations will rest partly upon presuppositional axioms and postulates that are taken on faith in order to generate coherent theories (see Kuhn 1962). St. Anselm aptly characterized this analytic method: "For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe—that unless I believed, I should not understand (Anselm 2009 [1078], 25). Dennett's argument for compatibilism, as summarized earlier, typifies this philosophical approach. In sum:

- The *sense* of free will is an aspect of human consciousness that generates an *ex post* awareness of the brain's many modules having communicated among themselves en route to determining an optimal course of behavior;
- The brain chooses optimally within the limits of bounded rationality. It promotes evolved biological imperatives for survival and reproduction on the basis of individual knowledge, experience, reason, and environmentally-determined scarcity constraints;
- Conscious awareness of brain activity, sensory awareness of choice alternatives, and wishful thinking are not tantamount to free will. Evidence from neuroscience demonstrates that consciousness and awareness confer no substantive control over the brain's decision-making processes;
- *Pace* Plato and *pro* Hume, all human action results from reason being the slave of passion;
- Whether consciousness awareness of the brain's deliberative process and resulting choices has evolutionary selective value, or is merely an artifactual by-product—in the manner of a "Cartesian theater" in philosopher Daniel Dennett's (1991) terms, or a collateral "spandrel" by evolutionist Steven Gould's lights—remains a topic of scientific and philosophical inquiry and debate;
- Evolutionists who argue for "group selection" theory conjecture that conscious (albeit *ex post*) awareness of the brain's decision-making process, coupled with the illusion of free will, are evolved social aspects of Darwinian natural selection. This conjecture, like group-selection theory generally, is controversial—mainstream evolutionary thinking argues instead that natural selection operates exclusively at the level of individuals (see Montanye forthcoming);
- The conscious *sense* of free will is a logical—although not necessarily a physical or metaphysical—consequence of the brain's having to deal with uncertainty and risk. Consider: foreknowledge of consequences would render the decision-making process patently deterministic;

- Mankind’s conscious “moral” sense similarly is a consequence of uncertainty and risk. The brain chooses in the *expectation* of prospering and flourishing optimally as the result of “morally” productive choices made in an environment of scarcity where many brains compete for control over the same resources. The conscious illusion of free will is morally immaterial;
- The brain’s unconscious decision-making process is driven by an awareness of *accountability* for past actions, and *responsibility* for future actions. The brain acts as a cost/benefit engine in this regard;
- Each brain module’s decision-making weight is revised in the light of payoffs from past choices—Bayes’ Theorem (statistics) and neural-network theory (computer science) provide useful analogies. Revision occurs autonomically. Belief that these weights can be conditioned, incentivized, and otherwise manipulated to increase aggregate prosperity in the face of resource scarcity justifies the artificial imposition of social rewards and punishments;
- The free-will illusion usefully justifies social laws and norms that hold individuals “morally” responsible and accountable for directly unproductive social behavior, including such actions as: free-riding (i.e., not contributing “fairly,” if at all, to the supply of economic *public goods* that benefit all members of society about equally); behavior that is redistributive (e.g., blackmailing and pick-pocketing); and behavior that is overtly wasteful (e.g., bribery, perjury, and capital murder, and yet not lobbying by rent- and entitlement-seeking political factions). Justifying social laws and norms on the presumption of free will disguises the underlying economic reasons for holding individuals responsible and accountable for their actions;
- The “beautiful illusion” of free will is misleading and scientifically wrong, albeit perhaps socially expedient.

Behaviorism and economics

Behaviorists and economists ground their scientific theories upon the power of incentives and the conditioning effects of positive and negative reinforcement schedules. Their theories implicitly deny the possibility of free will.

Behaviorists note that “[m]any apparently erratic shifts in the rate of responding, which had formerly been attributed to nebulous motivational variables or to ‘free will,’ have been traced by experiment to the influence of schedules of reinforcement” (quoted in Alhadeff 1982, 146, n.3). This line of thinking and research is identified closely with the psychologist B.F. Skinner’s work on laboratory animals. The extension of his ideas to the fashioning of normatively ideal cultural practices within human societies (see Skinner 1972) once drew more harsh criticism than most other radically utopian social schemes, both past and present. This hostility appears to have arisen from an evolved distrust of authoritarian/totalitarian political systems, the counter-cultural aversion to repressive social arrangements, and Skinner’s failure to propose correlative entitlements for compensating aggrieved individuals and factions.

Economists' thinking about free will, by comparison, evolved from Nineteenth Century moral and political philosophy. A humble economics view of Mankind's economic will was offered several decades ago by the distinguished Austrian-school economist Ludwig von Mises. His explanation touched only upon prevailing philosophical and theological conceptions of free will, the scientific debate having been nascent at that juncture:

Some philosophers are prepared to explode the notion of man's will as an illusion and self-deception because man must unwittingly behave according to the inevitable laws of causality. They might be right or wrong from the point of view of the prime mover or the cause itself. However, from the human point of view action is the ultimate thing. We do not assert that man is "free" in choosing and acting. We merely establish the fact that he chooses and acts and that we are at a loss to use the methods of the natural sciences for answering the question why he acts this way and not otherwise." (Mises 2008 [1949], 105).

General explanations of rational economic behavior have rested upon a variety of presuppositional axioms. The philosopher and political economist Jeremy Bentham argued that economic behavior arises from the pursuit of *pleasure* (utility) and the avoidance of *pain* (disutility). Modern economists stress instead the significance of *incentives* (roughly, the economic equivalent of behaviorists' reinforcement schedules) in motivating and directing the human will. Some economists characterize economic behavior as a constant search for the information, knowledge, and opportunities by which individuals improve their circumstances in the face of scarcity's constraining effects (see Kirzner 2009). These descriptions correspond with reality and are compatible with the free-will concept, but are too general to support testable, non-trivial hypotheses.

Positive economic theory, by contrast, which attempts to explain almost everything under the sun, admits no possibility of free will. Modern *microeconomic* (price) theory postulates that the human will is governed strictly by the rational evaluation of relative prices (Stigler and Becker 1977). In neuroscientific terms, this postulate implies the presence of a maximizing, right-hemisphere brain module that has evolved for the specialized purpose of comparing prices. The module's output is presumed to dominate complementary modules that evaluate the *value* aspects of choice alternatives. Price theory subsumes value theory by presupposing that the *ends* of rational human action (i.e., which goods are to be pursued) are given, fixed, and essentially immutable. This axiom subsequently was relaxed along positive lines to allow for changing values within certain categories of tastes and preferences due to shifting stocks of personal and social capital (Becker 1996, 4). Free will nevertheless remains precluded.

The purpose behind hard economic determinism is to prevent price theory's predictive failures from being casually dismissed on grounds of shifting tastes and preferences; determinism is the foundation of economics as a science. (Positive behaviorist postulates regarding reinforcement schedules might exist for similar reasons.) More pragmatically, positive economic theory can be mathematized whereas value theory cannot, values being both subjective and incommensurable. Consequently, positive

economics' deterministic presuppositions (and there are many of them; e.g., the omniscient, god-like foundations of "pure" and "perfect" competition) are not offered as comprehensive depictions of reality. They serve instead to ground meaningful (testable) statements about economic (choice) behavior. By contrast, modern experimental and behavioral economics (for which several Nobel prizes have been awarded) have documented both the variability of tastes and preferences over time and among individuals, and also the fallibility of human reason in the presence of economic incentives and relative prices. As the philosopher William James noted in a more general context, the art and wisdom of positive theorizing turns on knowing what to leave out.

Neuroeconomics, which uses brain imaging techniques to discover the biological and evolutionary foundations of economic behavior, seeks understanding in the same manner as neuroscience seeks to understand brain function more generally. Progress has been slow, and skepticism among classically-trained economists is rife. If neuroeconomics succeeds in explaining economic behavior as the result of competing brain modules, then the corpus of "blackboard" economic theory—including all presuppositions regarding free will—will require revision. Paradigm shifts within economic theory, as in other sciences, occur slowly as existing theories and models are overturned by more powerful and pragmatic ones. Shifts typically do not occur as the result of changing facts (see Kuhn 1962).

Social theory

Changing social ethics have confused the free-will concept. The concept nowadays can be interpreted to mean that individuals are endowed by Nature and Nature's God with broad freedom to *act* as they please, *as if* by their own free will. Individuals are *entitled*, in other words, to prosper and flourish independently—with society's moral blessing and economic support, of course—without regard for the consequences their actions entail. Social coercion, by this light, properly is directed, not against individuals who violate social norms and laws, but instead against impediments to every individual's pursuit of existential authenticity. Free will is regarded as conferring justification and license, implying compatibilistic freedom from social coercion rather than freedom from material determinacy. This position resembles St. Augustine's free-will argument (about which more later) that God alone is the legitimate and ultimate judge of "right" behavior. For Augustine, individuals need only love God with all their hearts, and love their neighbors as themselves. Beyond that, they are free by God's grace to do as they will. Paraphrasing the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, modern individuals believe in god-given free will even while denying the existence of the god that conferred it. The harsh reality, of course, is that the exercise of individuals' will is comprehensively regulated, both spontaneously in the course of interactions among individuals (*à la* Gazzaniga's "social brain"), and also by social norms and laws that are backed by threats of coercion.

Shifting ideas about the meaning of *freedom* have influenced thinking about free will since antiquity. The noted philosopher and economist Frank Knight described the meaning of freedom ("liberalism"), both as it emerged in the Eighteenth Century (and was defined systematically by the political philosopher John Stuart Mill [1859]), and as it

came to be reinterpreted thereafter in neo-Platonist fashion. The distinction between the two interpretations is the difference between *negative* and *positive* forms of freedom (Berlin 2006). Knight argues that classical liberalism (negative freedom) denoted

... individual freedom from the control of government, law and tradition in all fields of action, including religion, social relations and economic life. This freedom was early associated with political liberty in the sense of free or democratic government, through representative institutions. ... The later nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen the development of a school of thought which has insisted on using the name of liberalism, but which advocates to a large extent a reversal of the original liberal attitude toward government regulation of economic activities and relationships. ... The more extreme proponents of this new liberalism, or “neo-liberalism,” advocate a large measure of collectivism—replacement of exchange transactions by direct administration of economic affairs by political agencies. The argument of the neo-liberals is that political action is capable of securing a much larger degree of “real” liberty or freedom to the individual. (Knight and Merriam 1979 [1945], 6–7).

Liberalism (negative freedom) thus evolved into neo-liberalism (positive freedom), which also has been called neo-liberal synthesis, progressive liberalism, or simply progressivism. Neo-liberalism in this form suppresses the individual’s will in the name of normatively “real” freedom (Hegel’s conception). It demands an Orwellian-style surrender of the individual’s will to the authoritarian will of a god-like (omniscient and omnipotent) and presumptively representative state, whose will actually approximates Rousseau’s “general will” only by grand coincidence. Neo-liberalism therefore treats individuals as social means rather than as ends in themselves. The State’s ostensible reciprocal obligation is to provide an array of social entitlements that relieve individuals of such natural burdens as common sense responsibility, productive cooperation, and courtesy, while insulating preferred individuals against social accountability. Resistance to state authority is regarded as secular heresy, and so justifies inquisitorial tactics and methods (e.g., auto-da-fé) to extirpate. History reveals that such social arrangements fail spectacularly in the long run, and yet cockeyed optimism springs eternal.

Since Knight, the meaning of neo-liberalism (positive freedom) itself has been reversed by semantic drift and political intention. “Neo-liberalism” now denotes “neo-conservative” social ideals and policies that ironically are reminiscent of classical liberalism (negative freedom). The influential Canadian journalist Naomi Klein, for example, characterizes the University of Chicago’s extreme *laissez-faire* brand of political economy as “neoliberalism or, in the U.S., neoconservatism” (Klein 2007, 253; see also 14–15 and *passim*). Meanings have become so thoroughly muddled that these terms and their cognates now must be interpreted carefully and cautiously.

While colloquial meanings have shifted, the desire (dating back to Plato) to promote “real” freedom by constraining the human will continues apace. Only the proffered justifications for authoritarian and totalitarian control have changed. Justifications presently turn on discoveries that show the will emerging from an evolved

brain that often jumps to false and irrational conclusions (Kahneman 2011). One such false conclusion is that the will of individuals, whether free or not, must perforce be regulated for the good of other individuals and of society generally. Suitable regulation might be accomplished simply by “nudging” the will into proper alignment under a program of “libertarian paternalism” (*maternalism* is a fairer characterization) and by means of tendentious “choice architecture” (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Nudging in this sense represents a half-step between persuasion through Platonic “noble lies” and straightforward coercion. The psychologist Daniel Kahneman and the behavioral economist Richard Thaler separately received Nobel prizes for work along these lines. Their discoveries rejuvenate the logical problems addressed by Plato in *Republic*: if “brain bugs” are inherent, then on what basis can an imperfectly rational society choose who decides, which choices are to be nudged and in which direction, and why would a rational society empower the state to nudge in the first place?

Philosophy

The idea of free will was introduced by Plato in his *Republic* dialogue (Plato 1997a [4th Century BCE]), and later echoed in Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Plato argued that the will, as an aspect of the human soul, could be disciplined to choose and act freely; that is, without regard to the demands of Mankind’s inherently flawed passions. The philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas characterized Plato’s vision as meaning that “free will implies indifference to alternatives” (Aquinas 2009 [1256], III:75). A free will would enable rulers to choose, based upon ideal forms, ends that the rulers’ inherent passions otherwise might neither will nor desire. Perfect rulers could be trusted with the task of subjugating the will and passions of other (lesser) free men for the overall good of society, the passions of women and slaves already being constrained by prevailing social norms and laws. While Plato held that such indifference needed to be cultivated, the Romans saw it arising as a natural consequence of inherited wealth, the philosopher John Locke saw it being achieved through the rule of law, and Gandhi sought to achieve it through veganism. However achieved, indifference to alternatives became the hallmark of philosopher-kings, enlightened despots, democratic leaders, and other great souls. Ultimately, however, social choices reflect perforce some facet of the ruler’s will. The fundamental issue therefore is this: Whose will is to be supreme?

Plato’s instrumental invocation of free will entailed less freedom for all individuals. This flowed naturally from Plato’s staunch belief that Athenian-style direct democracy allowed free individuals too much latitude for indulging low passions. Democracy entailed too little social morality, authority, and public order for Plato’s aesthetic taste (the lack of social economic surplus, about which more later, meant that democratic Athenians could not imagine voting themselves rich). Plato’s taste instead favored Sparta’s authoritarian social system, which he viewed as being technically superior to Athenian democracy. The historian Thucydides noted that pro-Spartan sentiment was especially strong among Athens’ oligarchs. By Plato’s utilitarian and communitarian lights, however, “it isn’t the law’s concern to make any one class in the city outstandingly happy but to contrive to spread happiness throughout the city by

bringing citizens into harmony with each other through persuasion or compulsion and by making them share with each other the benefits that each class can confer on the community. The law produces such people in the city, not in order to allow them to turn in whatever direction they want, but to bind the city together. ... Extreme freedom can't be expected to lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery" (*Republic*, §519e–520; §564). Free will was the artifice that grounded Plato's authoritarian/totalitarian political vision. The slavery his vision entailed was imagined to be less egregious than the "extreme slavery" that otherwise would result as democracy descended into mob rule and ultimately into tyranny (the so-called "paradox of freedom"). Modern progressive (positive freedom) politics follows in Plato's intellectual tracks.

The vision expressed in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* dialogues grounded centuries of authoritarian and totalitarian rule by Church and Crown. Regimes throughout history have sought to engineer mass prosperity and flourishing through compulsory social arrangements intended to mitigate the constraining effects of material economic scarcity, while simultaneously curtailing wasteful competitive scrambling to possess available resources. Plato's political vision promised the best of all possible worlds by binding individuals, either voluntarily or by coercion, into productive social groups on the basis of knowledge, reason, justice, cost/benefit considerations, censorship, eugenics, common property (including women and children), compulsory labor specialization, and slavery. These hallmarks are characteristic of all engineered, pseudo-scientific, class-based societies. The philosopher Karl Popper aptly painted Plato as a misanthrope who sought human perfection through the state rather than through individuals (Popper 1963 [1945], vol. 1, *passim*). The title *Republic* represents a longstanding and misleading mistranslation of the Greek word meaning *State*.

History repeatedly has revealed the falsity of Plato's utopian vision and its instrumentally stylized free-will predicate. Its ultimate defeater is the fruitful ascendance of property rights and liberty concepts that began emerging during the Seventeenth Century (about which more later). These developments yielded vastly more prosperity and flourishing than could have been imagined within Plato's static, utopian social structure. And yet Plato's vision has avoided extinction. The Twentieth Century American journalist Whittaker Chambers famously was drawn to the utopian ideals of Platonic utilitarianism, Comtean positivism, and Soviet communism by the belief that classically liberal Western Civilization, which was predominantly Christian and nominally democratic, had lost the power to reform itself, "to hold convictions and to act on them" (Chambers 2002 [1952], 9). Chambers' fatalistic sense echoed Plato's mistaken belief that democracy degenerates perforce into tyranny. The alternative social arrangement offered by totalitarian communism—which ultimately came to be judged philosophically, as Sartre dryly noted, by its good intentions rather than by the tyrannical results documented by Solzhenitsyn (2007[1974])—appeared to offer the only feasible escape. Similar criticism is leveled nowadays against authoritarian capitalism (see, for example, Klein 2007), for which a vaguely imagined political and economic "third way," built around a new generation of indifferent and otherwise god-like philosopher-kings, is imagined as offering the only escape.

3. Free Will in Political and Religious Philosophy

Plato's *Republic* dialog addressed questions of justice, social structure, education, and philosophy within an ideally governed, authoritarian state. A free will, by Plato's lights, was a quality that could be cultivated within the souls of select individuals. These individuals were of patrician birth, well educated, naturally inclined toward philosophy (not coincidentally like Plato himself, he being one of only three contemporary philosophers deemed to have achieved the requisite state of indifference), and perhaps accustomed as well (like Socrates) to living as a gadfly in relative deprivation at society's margins. Such individuals elevated knowledge and reason above the low passions that motivated the *hoi polloi*—i.e., free men who demonstrated an “ambitions cast of mind” (*Laws*, §870c) by lusting after wealth and glory (*Republic*, §491). Only perfected individuals are suited to rule justly and *altruistically* (self-denying and other-regarding) as philosopher-kings. (The term *altruism* was coined by the Nineteenth Century social philosopher Auguste Comte. The ancient Greeks termed self-limitation for the sake of others, *kenosis*.) Only philosopher-kings could be trusted to check their naturally self-interested passions at the palace door.

Plato, like Stoic philosophers generally, viewed human passions as destructive forces. Unconstrained passions, even within a homogenous society, entailed an indefinitely large number of equally valid subjective truths that could be pursued freely and perhaps destructively within the structure of libertarian Athenian democracy. Aristotle, by contrast, viewed the passions as productive forces. The philosopher David Hume followed Aristotle when arguing that the passions not only enslaved reason, but also enslaved (i.e., constrained) one other (Hume 2009 [1739], 283). Modern neuroscience backs Aristotle and Hume (and also Hegel) by showing that passion is essential to human choice. Neither reason nor morality motivates action. Individuals lacking passion due to brain disorders cannot make choices despite possessing fully-functional reasoning ability (Gazzaniga 2008, 72–73, 148). The illusion of conscious reason, free will, and morality might seem to control intemperate passions, but evidence from neuroscience indicates otherwise.

The neo-Platonist theologian and philosopher of history St. Augustine—who was well educated like Plato, but who confessed his own imperfections—doubted that Plato's brand of individual perfection ever could be fashioned from what Kant later described as “the crooked timber of humanity”—that gnarly blemish of original sin. Augustine contrasted the “city of the world” (Rome) and, by allusion, Plato's utopian *Republic* and somewhat more practical *Laws*, with his own more perfect and earthly *City of God* (2009 [426 CE]). Augustine's spiritual vision nevertheless followed Book X of Plato's *Laws*, which established God's nature and status as a cosmic soul that was prior to, and regnant over both Mankind and the relatively diminutive gods of ancient mythology (Plato 1997b [4th Century BCE]). Augustine substituted a divine right of kings and clergy (the antithesis of secular government) for Plato's philosopher-kings (the antithesis of democratic government). Both men's vision entailed the “free” submission of human will to superior authority.

Another essential difference between Plato and Augustine lies in the meaning of *free* will, which both men invoked as an instrumental justification for their respective

ends. For Plato, a free will meant freedom from (indifference to) the soul's passions. For Augustine, it meant the freedom to indulge those passions and to be judged responsible and accountable by God. Augustine's neo-Platonist reinterpretation of Plato was necessary to his proof of God's existence and divine grace: "If then there is no grace of God, how does He save the world? And if there is no free will, how does He judge the world?" (quoted in Passmore 2009 [1969], 77); free will also and conveniently excused God from bearing responsibility for the world's evil. Aquinas, a later Scholastic thinker, elaborated Augustine's theological argument: "Man has free-will: otherwise counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments would be in vain" (Aquinas [1256] 2009, IV:104). The U.S. Supreme Court agrees despite Aquinas' rhetorical non-sequitur.

The influential philosophical "principle of alternative possibilities" argues that individuals can be held *morally* responsible for their actions—and therefore deserving of blame and punishment—only so long as they could have chosen to do otherwise. Absent assumptions about free will and moral responsibility, no punishment could be deserved or justified. The philosophy of "no-fault naturalism" explores this principle, arguing that determinism rules out moral responsibility (Waller 1991). Empirical studies demonstrate instead—contra arguments from divine grace, predeterminism, fatalism, and no-fault naturalism—that the brain's awareness of personal responsibility and accountability constrains "immoral" behavior by concentrating the "moral" mind (Gazzaniga 2011, 115; Harris 2012, 45). Determinism therefore provides no safe harbor against productive forms of justice.

Augustine's argument was opposed by neo-Platonist Pelagians who denied that grace alone redeemed original sin. Pelagians believed instead that free will was the key to mankind's perfectibility and salvation. The Christian Church, whose retail business model entailed intermediating divine grace, dismissed the Pelagian argument as *heresy* (a cognate of the ancient Greek word meaning *choice*). Loyola (and others) objected as a practical matter to the Church's hard Augustinian position, arguing that the claim of salvation being achieved solely through divine grace constructively removed Mankind's natural incentives and propensity to act morally. Experimental work in neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral economics confirms the validity of Loyola's concern. Accountability matters.

Philosophers misleadingly conflate the complementary concepts of responsibility and accountability, depending in part upon whether they are compatibilists or incompatibilists, and whether they also conflate morality and pragmatism. *Responsibility* logically concerns objective questions of causality: questions of the "Who struck John?" and "What harm was done?" variety; by comparison, a determination of "moral" responsibility might ask, "Who *didn't* strike John, and why not?" Absent overt confession, causal questions are resolved either by a preponderance of the evidence, or else beyond a reasonable doubt. *Accountability*, on the other hand, concerns socially constructed answers to questions of the sort, "What is to be done?" Answers to accountability questions turn on a variety of considerations, including the free will illusion. Answers can turn, for example, on whether an action was intentional or accidental, whether the actor suffered from diminished capacity, whether contributory negligence was involved, whether the individual responsible was acting in good faith or as a good samaritan, and

whether the accused is “too big to jail.” Ascriptions of accountability also can turn upon consideration of public sentiment, public safety, theories of deterrence and rehabilitation, the inherent human desire for retribution and “seeing justice done,” the utility of forgiveness (a largely forgotten desideratum, notwithstanding burgeoning demands for public apologies), the emotional needs of accusers, and the depth of the accused’s pockets. Accountability at other times is ascribed in order to create a feel-good sense of “social justice” having been achieved (Hayek 1976).

Forthrightly grounding accountability upon facts and plainly articulated social objectives, instead of resting it upon gossamer and *ad hoc* “moral” justifications, “beautiful illusions,” and visions of social justice, would be a distinguishing mark of social maturity and integrity. Cashmore aptly observes that “as more attention is given to the mechanisms that govern human behavior, it will increasingly be seen that the concept of free will is an illusion, and the fallacy of a basic premise of the judicial system will become more apparent. ... the time is opportune for society to reevaluate our thinking concerning the concept of free will, as well as the policies of the criminal justice system. (Cashmore, 2010, 1).

4. Free Will and Ambition

The evident link between free will and the concept of *ambition* has eluded scholarly consideration. This lacuna is due partly to ambition having been “a curiously neglected subject. ... Surprisingly, there are no book-length studies that detail ambition’s transformation [from vice to virtue], and few books at all on the subject” (King 2013, 4).

Plato, Augustine, and Aquinas are presumed to have been well-intentioned men of intellectual integrity (Plato least of all). But they also harbored private passions, and were not wholly indifferent to competing alternatives. Rather, they were self-interested, entrepreneurial pleaders whose passions made them true believers in the fundamental rightness of their respective causes. Plato touted the disinterested virtue of philosophers-kings, although his own failed political ambitions, first in Athens and later in Syracuse, belied this ideal. Augustine, as Bishop of Hippo, and Aquinas as a principal church figure, argued in God’s name for the necessity of comprehensive Church authority over the lives of ordinary individuals. Their ambition ostensibly entailed saving individual souls and promoting the collective good of the world, but it also advanced their own interests, which were coextensive with those of the Church itself. The free-will artifice justified and facilitated many extreme forms of self-interested mischief by Church and State alike over the centuries.

Economists specializing in industrial organization have noted that the Church’s structure, conduct, and performance historically resembled that of privately-held business organizations and authoritarian governments. The Church’s virtual monopoly over the salvation of souls directly benefitted the institution’s “owners” (popes, cardinals, etc.) through donations and legacies offered by worshipers, and also through such business practices as simony and the sale of indulgences (Ekelund and others, 1996). At its peak during the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, the Church wielded more political power and controlled more wealth than the nominally sovereign states within which it operated; Lord

Acton's familiar remark about the corrupting effect of absolute power was a commentary on papal arrogance. Street-level clergy operating at the lowest rungs of the Church's organizational structure captured benefits as well. The moral philosopher and political economist Adam Smith observed that "[i]n the church of Rome, the industry and zeal of the inferior clergy are kept more alive by the powerful motive of self-interest, than perhaps in any established protestant church" (Smith 1976 [1776], II:310–311). The ability of inferior clergy to profit from Church operations was a prime example of the conflicting incentives that exist between a firm's *principals* (owners) and its *agents* (employees). The Church did not condemn its endemic institutionalized rapacity until the Council of Trent in the mid- to late-Sixteenth Century, and then only in response to theological competition from captious Protestantism. In sum, the Church was dedicated to the alleviation of economic scarcity, first as it effected the Church itself and its constructive owners, and then indirectly for worshipers who were obliged to invest spiritually and financially in the Church's revenue-maximizing blend of commoditized mythology, promise, and hope.

Demands by God, kings, and philosophers for submissive obedience to tradition and arbitrary authority were justified through the free-will illusion. Christians were expected to will freely to "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" (Jesus), and slaves were expected to will freely their fidelity to their masters (St. Paul). (Islam—the word itself means "submission to God's will"—similarly demands acts of conspicuous obedience, freely willed.) Both Plato and the medieval Church (as personified by Martin Luther) required ordinary individuals to demonstrate willful obedience to authority by accepting graciously and gratefully their assigned vocations and humble social status *as if* Mankind were segmented by God and Nature into immutable castes and classes (Passmore 2009 [1969], 11). An obligatory homily of the Elizabethan Church denounced "the unlawful and restless desire in men to be of higher estate then God hath geven [*sic*] or appoynted [*sic*] unto them" (quoted in King 2013, 46). Individual efforts to prosper and flourish outside ecclesiastical channels were condemned as sinful; a later religion, Soviet communism, similarly restricted individuals to flourishing solely within Party channels. Everything was to be contained inside the Church; nothing was to be outside it, and nothing against it. The restrictions ostensibly were intended to improve individual souls for ultimate salvation while simultaneously combatting the earthly effects of resource scarcity. However, the restrictions' principal (and perhaps intended) effects—those that defined feudalism's class-based social structure—was to preserve social stability and the *status quo* distribution of incomes and wealth against the predictably disruptive effects of private ambition.

Ambition came officially to be considered as the greatest of all human evils, being wrought by free will, and being not of necessity. The medieval Church, working in tandem with parallel, quasi-secular institutions, pervasively regulated individual ambition and initiative over the span of several centuries. The Geneva Bible (1540, its first English translation in 1560 predated the King James translation) specifically condemned ambition by linking it with Adam's fall from grace: God "reprocheth Adam's miserie, whereinto he was fallen by ambition" (quoted in King 2013, 35). Ambition, rather than free will *per se*, thus became the theological source of original sin. The combined efforts of Church and

State to stifle ambition—to constrain free will—effectively throttled human prosperity and flourishing by restricting the scope of individual freedom, entrepreneurship, and innovation. This was done, as it is today, in the name of realizing normatively greater “real” (positive) freedom. A late-Nineteenth Century papal encyclical condemned both the social sciences and Freemasonry for teaching “that men all have the same rights, and are perfectly equal in condition; that every man is naturally independent; that no one has a right to command others; ... Hence the people are sovereign;” (Leo XIII 1884). The legacy of restrictive Church dogma resounded within European peasantry long after the rise of democratic secularism. One prevalent rule of thumb among European peasantry still warns against raising children to be better than their parents.

Proscriptions against ambition stabilized a highly imperfect society within the constraints of resource scarcity by creating a social system that approached the conceptual limit of a “stationary” and “evenly rotating” economy: “... a rigid system [that] is not peopled with living men making choices and liable to error; it is a world of soulless unthinking automatons; it is not human society, it is an ant hill.” (Mises 2008 [1949], 249). The mathematician and creator of *cybernetic theory* (the science of controlling complex systems), Norbert Wiener, similarly characterized the consequences of stifling human ambition: “Those [like Plato, Luther, and the Soviet State] who would organize us according to permanent individual functions and permanent individual restrictions condemn the human race to move at much less than half-steam. They throw away nearly all our human possibilities and by limiting the modes in which we may adapt ourselves to future contingencies, they reduce our chances for a reasonably long existence on this earth” (Wiener 1988 [1954], 52). Machiavelli was perhaps the first serious thinker to attribute generations of social and economic stagnation to philosophical, theological, and moral teachings proscribing free will and ambition:

Our religion [Christianity] has glorified humble and contemplative men more than active men. It has then placed the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human; the other [religion, i.e., Gentile paganism] placed it in greatness of spirit strength of body, and all other things capable of making men very strong. And if our religion asks that you have strength in yourself, it wishes you to be capable of more suffering than of doing something strong. This model of life thus seems to have rendered the world weak and given it in to prey to criminal men, who can manage it securely, seeing that the collectivity of men, so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring their beatings than of avenging them. And although the world appears to be made effeminate and heaven disarmed, it arises without doubt more from the cowardice of the men who have interpreted our religion according to idleness and not according to virtue. (Machiavelli 1996 [1531], 132)

Machiavelli's criticism was echoed by the Eighteenth Century historian Edward Gibbon and the Nineteenth Century philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, among others. By contrast, the virtues of a free and *open society* (the philosopher Henri Bergson's term) were documented eloquently by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (1988 [1835]).

5. Free Will in Political Economy

Plato's quashing of political ambition by means of self-limitation and self-control was imagined to create a class of first-best rulers who were too perfect to desire public office, no less to campaign for it. By Plato's lights, "no one willingly chooses to rule and to take other people's troubles in hand ... good people won't be willing to rule for the sake of either money or honor. ... it is thought shameful to seek to rule before one is compelled to. ... In a city of good men, if it came into being, citizens would fight in order *not to rule*, just as they now do in order to rule" (*Republic*, §347–347d). The losers in this competition of avoidance therefore demand compensatory wages in exchange for their public service (§346e–347). It followed, by Plato's logic, that "no one in any position of rule, insofar as he is a ruler, seeks or orders what is advantageous to himself, but what is advantageous to his subjects" (§342e). Only those individuals (i.e., potential tyrants) whose will is enslaved by passions for wealth, honor, and glory would enter the political fray voluntarily; it is ironic by this light, although not entirely surprising, that nine individuals associated with Plato's Academy went on to become murderous tyrants. Political economists from Adam Smith forward theorized that individuals who earnestly seek a public office are among the last persons who should be elected to it. The argument is straightforward: ambitious individuals seek political office for the wrong reasons—if not to exercise their inflated vanity, then to gain both insider access to the public fisc and the authority to demand *side payments* (bribes and kickbacks) in return for deciding public issues in ways that benefit private interests at the public's expense.

The Romans had a word for denoting individuals who aspired to political office without being called—*ambitio* (Caesar was said to possess it); the English word *ambition* is a cognate. Ambition initially was applied to individuals who solicited votes, although its meaning broadened over time (King 2013, 15). The Greeks used not one word for this purpose, but three, which corresponded with Plato's tripartite political analysis. These words, which often are translated as "ambition," specifically denoted love of honor, love of acclaim, and self-seeking through rivalry and strife (13). Augustine encompassed these meanings within the Latin word *avaritia*, which implied as well over-eagerness and greed (8). The English cognate *avarice* implies similar qualities today.

Concerted efforts by Church and State to suppress individual will and ambition among the social masses might appear in hindsight as being merely wrongheaded, as confirmed by the growth of mass prosperity and flourishing that accompanied the paradigmatic shift of ambition's social status from vice to virtue (see King 2013). Widely-used macroeconomic indices compiled by the economist Bradford DeLong (1998) document the absence of prosperity growth between the years 500 BCE (the mid-point of religion's Axial Age [800 BCE to 200 BCE], and a century before Plato's *Republic*), and 1500 CE (roughly two centuries before the Industrial Revolution's beginnings). These data, as visualized in part in Figure 1 below, show average prosperity beginning to grow, albeit trivially, during the Sixteenth Century, at which time sovereigns actively sought ambitious individuals to subdue and exploit newly-discovered lands, and the Church sought them to missionize native heathens to Christianity. Prosperity rose somewhat more rapidly during the Seventeenth Century, and yet by some accounts the average prosperity of London's

poor remained no greater at the dawn of the Nineteenth Century than it had been more than two millennia earlier. Overall, however, average prosperity blossomed in the Eighteenth through Twentieth Centuries as ambition and capitalism displaced honor and obedience to arbitrary authority as society's predominant governing forces. These trends indicate a direction of history that is consistent with arguments advanced by the historicist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel and the political scientist Francis Fukuyama (see Fukuyama 1992).

Such shifts were not welcomed categorically at the time. The philosopher Edmund Burke famously expressed remorse at the passing of old-world order and traditions following the French Revolution and the rise of reason and Enlightenment thinking: "But such an age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, calculators, and economists has succeeded; and the gory of Europe is extinguished forever" (Burke 1960 [1790], 387). Nietzsche lamented the shift of power to the people because it constrained the ambition of elite *Übermenschen* (Nietzsche 1968 [1901]). The recent reappearance of authoritarianism and social engineering on the world's stage suggests that the direction of history is regressing to the mean of Mankind's intellectual nature. The rise of international terrorism prompted the political philosopher and columnist George Will to note shortly after publication of Fukuyama's *End of History* (1992) that history had returned from vacation.

Shifting theological and secular opinion in the face of growing opportunity, along with rising prosperity and human flourishing, facilitated the transformation of free will and ambition from private vice to public virtue. The sociologist Max Weber characterized the theological shift in terms of ambition having become justified in God's eyes: "For, in conformity with the Old Testament and in analogy to the ethical valuation of good works, asceticism looked upon the pursuit of wealth as an end in itself as highly reprehensible; but the attainment of it as a fruit of labor in a calling was a sign of God's blessing" (Weber 1992 [1930], 172). The economist Albert Hirschman documented the intellectual shift by which "interests were called upon to counteract the passions" (2013 [1997], 7). The historian William King argues simply that the Seventeenth Century saw a "growing acceptance of the inevitability of ambition and the utter futility of appeals to the virtuous in man to quell its hunger" (King 2013, 5). In each case, the presiding intellectual and ruling elites began accepting Mankind as it is rather than as it ought to be. King (107–114) nevertheless acknowledges the influence of Francis Bacon's essay, *Of Ambition* (1901 [1625], 106–109). Bacon, echoing Machiavelli(1531) in part, argued that competition among ambitious individuals could create beneficial political, social, and economic equilibria without need for pervasive oversight by Church and State.

History not only has proven Bacon correct, but also shows him as having been too conservative in his thinking. Adam Smith later noted Mankind's inherent propensity "to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another," thereby creating prosperity through the freedom to pursue self-interest freely within competitive markets (Smith 1976 [1776], I:17; see also McCloskey 2006). Smith also noticed how private ambition benefitted society in the aggregate as individuals were led "as if by an invisible hand to promote an end which was not part of his intention. ... By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I

have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good” (I:477–478).

Building upon the insights of Bacon, Montesquieu, Vico, Adam Smith, and others, James Madison incorporated ambition and competition with America’s political constitution. Madison explained in *The Federalist* No. 51 that “[a]mbition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man, must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay (1961 [1787], 322). The result has been likened to the free-will aspect of Augustine’s *City of God*.

Human will and individual ambition thus became the basis for government being controlled by ordinary individuals, rather than vice-versa. The paradigm under which Church and State controlled the will and ambition of individuals had passed, although its legacy remains vibrant. The neo-Hobbesian war that rages between positive and negative conceptions of freedom generates rancorous political confrontations on a daily basis. Advocates of positive freedom argue that the American Constitution is “not a static but rather a living document, and must be read in the context of an ever-changing world. ... According to this view, the Founding Fathers and original ratifiers told us *how* to think but are no longer around to tell us *what* to think” (Obama 2006, 89–90). Advocates of negative freedom accept the second quoted sentence while flatly rejecting the first. The historical trend of thinking about free will, ambition, and avarice makes clear that the Founding Fathers “told us” to think in terms of negative freedom. The political left claims to be “on the right side of history and morality” while acting instead to repeat it.

Ambition’s shifting intellectual status from private vice to public virtue was a necessary but not sufficient cause of mass prosperity and flourishing. Two other conditions also were necessary. First, individuals needed to be held socially responsible and accountable for the external consequences of their private actions. The free-will illusion traditionally justified this requirement (as discussed earlier), although justification could have been achieved more directly and honestly (though perhaps less easily) on grounds of productive efficiency tempered by *ad hoc* “moral” accountability considerations. The second necessary condition was the institution of property rights and enforceable contracts, as adumbrated in John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government* (Locke 1988 [1689]). Locke established property rights as correlative gifts from God, although his proposed system intrinsically entailed freedom from prevailing theological and quasi-secular restraints against ambition and the free exercise of individual will. Recent law-and-economics scholarship has established (*contra* Locke’s theistic argument) that property rights emerge spontaneously under conditions of individual freedom, responsibility, accountability, and enforceable contracts. Productive systems of rights emerge naturally because they foster prosperity and flourishing in the face of resource scarcity (Montanye 2015).

Figure 1 depicts the rise of *real* (inflated-adjusted) per-capita prosperity that occurred between the years 1700 and 2000, as documented by the DeLong data described earlier. The trend lines representing *Rights* and *Ambition* visualized in the Figure reflect

the relative frequencies with which these two words appeared in English language books published during each year of the depicted interval. Quantitative measures of relative word frequencies are called *ngrams*, a term of art in the argot of computational linguistics (see Montanye 2015 and 2016); note that ngrams are unrelated to *engrams*, the latter being hypothetical changes in brain states that explain the process of memory. The ngram data visualized in Figure 1 were drawn from the online Google Books Ngram Viewer (2018).

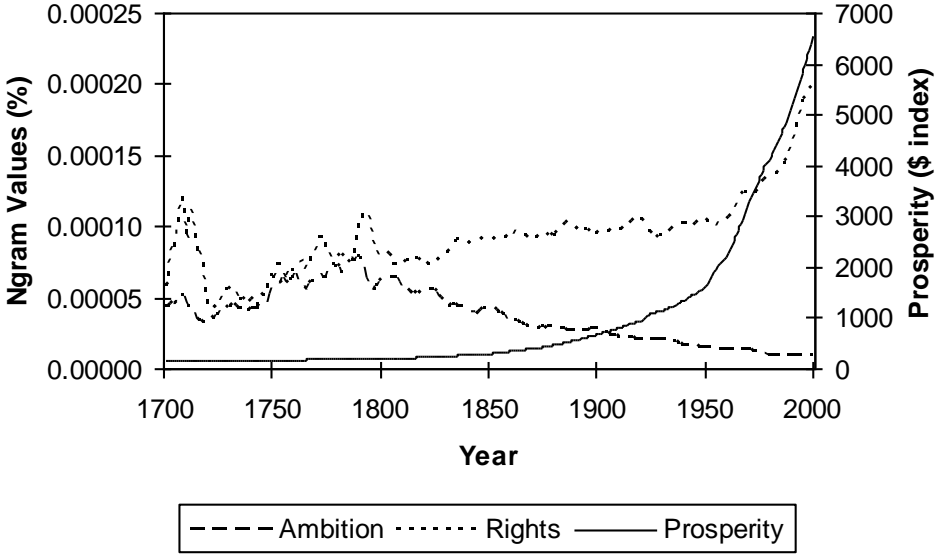


Figure 1. Ambition, Rights, and Prosperity: 1700–2000
 Data sources: Google (2018) and DeLong (1998)

Figure 1 shows the published discussion of rights peaking predictably in the years following publication of Locke’s *Second Treatise* (1689). The discussion of rights and ambition tracked one another between the years 1725 and 1800 as the two concepts vied for intellectual supremacy. Concerns about ambition waned as prosperity grew and rights became the governing paradigm. The inflected rise of interest in rights from the mid-Twentieth Century onward likely is overblown to an unknowable extent due to systematic confusion between productive rights *per se*, and unproductive social entitlements that positive-freedom political advocates misleadingly persist in calling rights (see Montanye 2016). Not shown in Figure 1 is the ngram trend of *Free Will*, which held steady at a relatively low level throughout the interval, having been subsumed by considerations of ambition.

5. Conclusion

William James harmlessly quipped that his first act of free will was to believe in free will. For earlier philosophers and theologians, by contrast, the idea of free will provided a cynical, albeit eminently useful justification for subjugating the social masses—enslaving them with promises of benefits for society as a whole (Plato), and centuries later with promises of salvation for individuals’ immortal souls (Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and others). For Plato, Mankind’s improvement could come only through the creation of a perfectly formed secular state that was ruled pervasively and authoritatively by perfected (i.e., indifferent) philosopher-kings. For neo-Platonist and Scholastic theologians, Mankind’s improvement required an earthly City of God, a shabby simulacrum of which came to be governed authoritatively and pervasively by the Church and divine-right kings. The free will illusion served both causes as an instrumental artifice that justified the maintenance of social stability and the status quo distribution of wealth.

The persistent lack of prosperity growth prior to the Seventeenth Century meant that the great mass of individuals then alive was no better off than ancestors living in Plato’s time. Social and economic stagnation of this scope, magnitude, and duration requires a robust explanatory theory. The free-will illusion, which justified holding Mankind’s will and ambition in check, amply grounds such a theory. Only with the rise of modern secular democracy was the free-will concept transformed pragmatically, albeit disingenuously (often by means of “noble” lies and “beautiful illusions”), in a way that promoted justice, social prosperity, and mass flourishing in the face of economic scarcity.

Philosophers, economists, and other social commentators have failed by and large to apprehend the free-will concept in this light. Neuroscientists now feel obliged to demonstrate the concept’s vacuity, just as scientists in other fields demonstrate the material impossibility of God. Scarce resources regrettably have been squandered searching for deep meaning in and pouring deep meaning into this intrinsically empty illusion.

Plato’s political philosophy and the Church’s political theology, both of which were premised on free will, were exactly wrongheaded if their respective purposes truly were intended to benefit the social masses in the face of material economic scarcity. The apparent error in each case was failing to recognize and accept that individual freedom and ambition are essential to human prosperity and flourishing. For pervasive authoritarian schemes to work as theorized, society must be either a zero- or negative-sum game. Otherwise, governing *as if* such were the case ineluctably makes the presupposition self-fulfilling. Pervasively authoritarian social schemes require, among other things, a generous supply of indifferent philosopher-kings that possess god-like indifference, omniscience and omnipotence. Rulers of this sort are among the scarcest of all resources, if indeed they exist at all.

In any case, dismissing colossal errors simply as if they were mistaken judgments is far too lenient. A theory that incorporates “mistake” as an explanatory term explains everything, and so is a theory of nothing. A better, positive approach interprets wrongheaded decisions as “interested errors” (the Physiocrat economist Helvétius’ term)—a ploy by which cunning elites manipulate weak and gullible social masses. The true

intention behind the restrictive social policies put into place by Church and State become entirely comprehensible when considered in the light of clever thinkers blindly overcoming the constraining effects of scarcity in their own lives by systematically shifting scarcity's detrimental effects onto the lives of others. The free-will illusion grounded this pattern of mischief for centuries. The social masses accepted the resulting social arrangements and adverse outcomes, not so much out of free will, but due rather to an abject fear of God, and secondarily out of respect for the learned philosophers and theologians who promised miraculously imaginative rewards in this life and the next. Lacking opportunities for voice or exit, the social masses were obliged to suffer in silence the plight of the weak.

Modern neuroscience dismisses free will as an illusion. Mankind's capacity for passion, knowledge, and reason is recognized instead as the evolved means (always constrained and often imperfect) by which individuals further their inherent passions for survival and reproduction, prosperity and flourishing. Science shows that evolution never produced free will. This "beautiful illusion" no longer passes critical scientific muster. The free-will concept deserves to be retired at this juncture in favor of more honest, forthright, and transparent justifications for social control.

Acknowledgement

I thank Max Hocutt, University of Alabama emeritus professor of philosophy, for many generous insights and comments on this topic (among others). The errors expressed here regrettably are mine alone.

References

Alhadeff, David. 1982. *Microeconomics and Human Behavior: Toward a New Synthesis of Economics and Psychology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Anselm, St. 2009 [1078]. *Proslogium*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Aquinas, St. Thomas. 2009 [1256]. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, vols. III and IV. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Augustine, St. 2009 [426]. *City of God*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

Barker, Dan. 2018. *Free Will Explained: How Science and Philosophy Converge to Create a Beautiful Illusion*. New York: Sterling.

Bacon, Francis. 1901 [1625]. "Of Ambition." In *Essays: Or Counsels Civil and Moral*, edited by B. Perry (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Company), pp. 106–109.

Becker, Gary. 1996. *Accounting for Tastes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Berlin, Isaiah. 2006. "Two Concepts of Freedom." In *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age: Their rise and Influence on Modern Thought*: edited by H. Hardy (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), pp. 155–207.
- Burke, Edmund. 1960 [1790]. "Reflections on the Revolution in France." In *Edmund Burke Selected Works*, edited by W. Bate (New York: Modern Library), pp. 343–423.
- Cashmore, Anthony. 2010. "The Lucretian Swerve: The Biological Basis of Human Behavior and the Criminal Justice System." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 107(10): 1–6.
- Chambers, Whittaker. 2002 [1952]. *Witness*, 50th Anniversary ed. Washington, DC: Regnery.
- DeLong, J. Bradford. 1998. *Estimating World GDP, One Million B.C.–Present*. http://www.j-bradford-delong.net/TCEH/1998_Draft/World_GDP/Estimating_World_GDP.html. Retrieved December 21, 2013.
- Dennett, Daniel. 1991. *Consciousness Explained*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Dennett, Daniel. 2003. *Freedom Evolves*. New York: Viking.
- Dennett, Daniel. 2015 [1984]. *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ekelund, Robert, Robert Hebert, Robert Tollison, Gary Anderson, and Audrey Davidson. 1996. *Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon Books.
- Gazzaniga, Michael. 2008. *Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Human*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Gazzaniga, Michael. 2011. *Who's in Charge: Free Will and the Science of the Brain*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Gazzaniga, Michael. 2018. *The Consciousness Instinct: Unraveling the Mystery of How the Brain Makes the Mind*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Google. 2018. Google Books Ngram Viewer. [http:// books.google.com/ngrams](http://books.google.com/ngrams). Retrieved July 11, 2018.

- Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, and John Jay. 1961 [1787]. *The Federalist Papers*. New York: New American Library.
- Harris, Sam. 2012. *Free Will*. New York: Free Press.
- Hayek, F.A. 1976. *Law, Legislation and Liberty, Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hirschman, Albert. 2013 [1997]. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Hume, David. 2009 [1739]. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kirzner, Israel. 2009. "Human Nature and the Character of Economic Science: The Historical Background of the Misesian Perspective." In *All We Need is a Paradigm: Essays in Science, Economics, and Logic from The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, edited by S. Upham (Chicago: Open Court), pp. 1–11.
- King, William Casey. 2013. *Ambition, a History from Vice to Virtue*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Klein, Naomi. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt.
- Knight, Frank, and Thornton Merriam. 1979 [1945]. *The Economic Order and Religion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Leibniz, G. W. 1908 [1714]. *Philosophical Works of Leibniz*, 2d. New Haven, Conn.: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor.
- Leo XIII. *Humanum Genus: Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Freemasonry*. http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_18840420_humanum-genus.pdf
- Locke, John. 1988 [1689]. *Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. 1996 [1531]. *Discourses on Livy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- McCloskey, Deirdre. 2006. *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mill, John Stuart. 2009 [1859]. *On Liberty*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Mises, Ludwig von. 2008 [1949]. *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. Irvington-on-Hudson, New York: Foundation for Economic Education.
- Montanye, James. 2015. "A Theory of the Rights Concept." *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* 23(1): 65–91.
- Montanye, James. 2016. "Grievance and Shame in the Modern Age of Entitlement." *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* 24.1: 59–85.
- Montanye, James. forthcoming. "Ambition: From Pagan Virtue to Modern Political Biology." *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1968 [1901]. *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufman. New York: Random House.
- Obama, Barack. 2006. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- O'Connor, Timothy. 2016. "Free Will." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/freewill>.
- Passmore, John. 2009 [1969]. *The Perfectibility of Man*, 3rd edn. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Plato. 1997a. *Republic*. In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by J. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett), pp. 971–1223.
- Plato. 1997b. *Laws*. In *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by J. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett), pp. 1318–1616.
- Popper, Karl. 1963 [1945]. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Searle, John. 2007. *Freedom and Neurobiology: Reflections on Free Will, Language, and Political Power*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Skinner, B. F. 1972. *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

- Smith, Adam. 1976 [1776]. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*, edited by E. Cannan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. 2007 [1974]. *The Gulag Archipelago*, abridged edn. New York: HarperPerennial.
- Stigler, George, and Gary Becker. 1977. "De Gustibus non est Disputandum." *American Economic Review* 67: 76–90.
- Thaler, Richard, and Cass Sunstein. 2008. *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1988 [1835, 1840]. *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. New York: Harper and Row.
- Waller, Bruce, 1991. *Freedom Without Responsibility*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Weber, Max. 1992 [1930]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Wiener, Norbert. 1988 [1954]. *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. New York: Da Capo.
- Wilson, Edward O. 2012. *The Social Conquest of Earth*. New York: Liveright.