

# Second Philosophy

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## INTRODUCTION

A really, really, really good way to upset someone is to tell them they have no free will, that they are not free, that they have no freedom. But, really, why all the fuss?

### Consider this:

1. The notion of free will is incoherent with what we know to be the current state of affairs in the world (physical laws, both Newtonian and quantum) and what we know to be our physical and chemical make-up.
2. Therefore, the only thing we possess when we say we have free will is the illusion of free will.

But:

1. We are reluctant to renounce our freedom despite the logical incompatibility of freedom and determinism because: Historically, the notion of freedom is what allows our code of moral responsibility to function justly. Also, freedom allows us to claim desert and distribute justice (Smilansky, 2001). And it is freedom that allows us to live as active agents in the world, allows us to be creative, to form significant and valuable relationships with others, to fall in love, to live with dignity, and to be the rational and civilised beings we believe we are.
2. Also, despite the looming threat of determinism, we still feel free. When it comes to acting on our desires, we have a clear sense of choosing between two or more alternative courses of action and tend to deliberate between them, we consider reasons for and against, and when we come to make a decision to act, we feel that we have done so with cause, that it was up to us, and that had we chosen to, we could have done otherwise.

### A brief history of thought on free will:

Plato and Aristotle defined free will as an attribute of any agent that also exhibits a capacity for intellect. Aquinas said the same. Hume stressed the ability to act or to not act based on one's determination and will and Hobbes maintained that free will is a the ability to act without external impediments.

Compatibilists are the cool philosophers who admirably aim to reconcile free will with determinism by claiming, for example, a difference between being coerced or manipulated to act or will, and being constrained to do so. Our actions and choices and desires very often feel unconstrained even if they might be caused.

Other interesting and persuasive theories are Harry Frankfurt's\* hierarchical model of desires, where humans have the capacity to develop second-order desires, those desires which concern wanting the sort of will we want to have, and John Martin Fischer's\* reasons-responsive model where humans have the capacity to respond to and act according to certain reasons and rational considerations.

These theories show that humans exhibit free will, albeit at a limited level.

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## **Smilansky's accusation of shallowness!**

Smilansky calls any view that seeks to make free will compatible with determinism “shallow” because, while perfectly valid at a functional and practical level, compatibilist theories always ignore the ultimate reality of our existence, that things simply are the way they are and our level of control over our actions and choices, while real and significant at the social and practical level, is actually very limited. Why? Because determinism rules.

## **A brief word about determinism:**

Determinism is the thesis that given the past and the laws of physics or nature, the present could not have been otherwise. Determinism is a fact of reality, as Newtonian mechanics show, and even when determinism is not a fact, as quantum mechanics often imply, the alternative, indeterminism, provides no relief, since this demands that things happen without cause and that they are therefore based on random chance. If our actions are random or based on chance then we no more choose them than when they are determined.

In a world where Newtonian mechanics prevail, libertarian free will is impossible. And where quantum mechanics prevail, libertarian free will is still not guaranteed, because as Barry Loewer\* shows us, Bohm's theory actually supports causality and Wignerian mechanics support chance. Both cause and chance deny agent libertarian free will, where an agent's free choices must originate in the agent, and therefore offer “little prospect for gaining libertarian freedom from physics.”

## **Conclusion: It's all an illusion.**

Shallow compatibilism is cool in so far as it offers the “illusion” of free will, which is positive, practical and preserves the “moral and personal reality” in our lives.

But, we need to simply accept the fact that ultimately the only thing we possess when we say we have free will is the illusion of free will.

This doesn't mean that we are creating happy illusions, or that we prefer ignorance to truth. The point is that the illusion is already in place, and it is real enough in so far as it allows us to function as rational and dignified beings, who forge valuable relationships and perform creative activities, who may claim desert for their successes and talents, and distribute justice to those who do bad things. In Smilansky's “land of illusion” we are able to lead the “free” and, therefore, civilised lives we cherish.

## **QUESTIONS:**

1. What is your knee-jerk reaction to Smilansky's thesis that the notion of free will is a reality only on a shallow, everyday, and functional level, but is ultimately an illusion? Does this sound instinctively acceptable? If not, why not?
2. How does this theory impact on moral responsibility? To be genuinely morally responsible for an act you would have to be the ultimate cause of that act or the cause/author of your self, which is impossible. According to Smilansky, when you act, you act in a certain way because that's just the way you are and any rational deliberation and identification with one's act is true and valid and free on the shallow level, but not on the ultimate level. So, does this rule out genuine moral responsibility?

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3. What aspects of yourself as a civilised, rational and dignified human being are altered or threatened by the idea that ultimately free will is an illusion? Is it your sense of creativity, your ability to love freely, or to claim a certain way of life freely? Something else? Can these traits, aspects or characteristics be salvaged even when, in line with Smilansky, free will is an illusion?

You've read the notes, hope they make some sense. Basically, I was thinking about free will as an illusion while on the course and then in writing my assignment I came across Saul Smilansky's thesis. I think he is basically saying that we need to just admit it to ourselves, that - based on what we know about the world and about our own makeup - free will is an illusion. That is one level, on the compatibilist level, it all makes sense and words. But we cannot ignore the ultimate level, where we things simply happen because of the way things are... This is not a BAD thing. It just is the way things are. The illusion is in place, we aren't being silly or ignorant or accepting a lie. But because we do feel free and because freedom serves us on a practically and day to day level, then it is fine to keep the illusion.

## REFERENCES:

\*Papers by Frankfurt and Loewer can be found in the metaphysics course text, Crane, T. and Farkas, K. (eds.), 2004 Metaphysics: A Guide and Anthology. Summaries and references to their views, including Martin Fischer's are excellently dealt with in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2004/entries/compatibilism>

Smilansky, Saul, "Free Will: From Nature to Illusion"

[http://philo.haifa.ac.il/faculty\\_pages/smilansky/FW%20Nature%20to%20Illusion.pdf](http://philo.haifa.ac.il/faculty_pages/smilansky/FW%20Nature%20to%20Illusion.pdf)

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## DISCUSSION:

So - the first question is: What is your knee-jerk reaction to Smilansky's thesis that the notion of free will is a reality only on a shallow, everyday, and functional level, but is ultimately an illusion? Does this sound instinctively acceptable? If not, why not?

**Squish:** I find it completely acceptable

**Marya:** Knee jerk says that though in theory I can see this to be true, I think it 'seems' to be missing something out

**Oswy:** I am not quite happy with the word illusion although I accept that determinism is true.

**Beezle:** I'm inclined to say that it is an illusion

**Marya:** the problem I have is that I do perceive there to be a degree of free will, but as I mentioned earlier, I have not studied this very much so am just giving not very well thought out thoughts here :) I perceive that there are multiple wills in the world that influence each other

**Squish:** ah Marya - there is nothing contradictory about subjectively perceiving free will and having free will be an illusion

**Beezle:** I once thought quantum theory was a problem for free will, but no longer do I accept that. Same for Chaos theory; quantum, or chaos is not free, just random

**Marya:** and although those outcomes are determined in the sense that they will happen due to outside influences of other wills, I do not see that this must necessarily mean there is no free will at all

**Squish:** what do you mean by free then, Beezle? Some might define it as simply "capable of being otherwise"

**Beezle:** to be able to do something without any influence other than one's own whim

**Squish:** mm, that concept might need further exploration

**Marya:** I thought of free will as having the ability to make a choice

**Beezle:** if we are a product of nature and nurture there must be some level of influence, though

**Squish:** it sounds like a very Humean idea of free will

**Chimeric:** I think this feeling of making choices is quite valid, but if you keep going back to the ultimate level you'll find that you are not the ultimate cause of you current action. You would have to be your own ultimate cause to be truly free.

**Squish:** I am quite happy with the idea that I may only have proximate free will

**Beezle:** anyone here familiar with gene-machine Darwinism?

**Marya:** I see that Chim, but what I also see is that the whole system is an interconnected number of different causes and at one point, it is possible to make a choice

**Chimeric:** Yes, Squish - that's the compatibilist position - the difference being coerced and caused.

**Chimeric:** Instead of proximate why don't you just call it illusory free will?

**Squish:** heh, illusory only at the ultimate level ;)

**Oswy:** I try to look at these issues from two perspectives. From a third person point of view it seems clear that determinism is true. All actions have an antecedent cause. From a first person point of view we feel we have free will. The issue is how to reconcile these two perspectives?

**Squish:** proximate because I feel free enough, and therefore happy enough, at the practical level or what I call the proximate level

**Chimeric:** No, Squish - there is no free will at the ultimate, only illusory free will at the compatibilist level.

**Chimeric:** Yes, Squish - that's it - feeling free, feeling happy, feeling civilised.

**Squish:** I think that people who are bothered by the idea that free will might be an illusion are mostly troubled with the notion that they might not be able to do what makes them happy

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**Chimeric:** why aren't you happy with the word illusion?

**Chimeric:** Yes, I think that is well put, Squish.

**Squish:** I suppose b/c I think that proximate free will is "real" enough to satisfy me and it's not an illusion at the proximate level

**Marya:** I'll just give a quick example of what I mean: say I have a terrible fear of spiders, but, despite my fear, I choose to pick one up because something else happened that day that made me feel a little stronger about such things - there is no obligation for me to pick it up or not to pick it up - there were a series of events that caused me to react that way at that moment

**Squish:** ..."there were a series of events that caused me..."

**Marya:** yep, I know that I am saying caused me - it is an example of a point where I could have done either of the two things - feeling stronger about it doesn't necessarily mean 'I would' do it. Meaning, there was an equal chance that I might have done either of those two things

**Oswy:** Illusion may give the impression that our first person feelings are somehow trivial. I think like Smilanski and other philosophers that the first person feelings are functional. They serve an important purpose.

**Beezle:** does the antecedent provide enough justification for the consequent?

**Squish:** in what way would the resulting action be a choice, if it is a causal chain?

**Chimeric:** Yes, Oswy, Smilansky wants to say, that illusion is not a bad thing if it serves a functional purpose and we are aware of it.

**Squish:** this has gotten me thinking about the butterfly effect

**Marya:** yes indeed, butterfly effect is a great example; a huge interconnected series of events

**Chimeric:** Marya - some chemical reaction occurred in your brain that made you feel stronger to make the choice to pick up the spider. Something you aren't aware of. A read a study that says these chemical reactions occur moments before we actually make a choice to do something.

**Chimeric:** I think that's on the Stanford entry for free will or for compatibilism.

**Squish:** ah, but we can't be sure there really was an equal chance between two seemingly equivalent events

**Marya:** I have read a little about how the brain functions and do realise that most decisions are made long before we become aware of them :)

**Squish:** but we don't know if those neurological events themselves are determined...as far as I understand it

**Oswy:** I am certain there was not an equal chance and that it is not true in a Humean sense that you made an internal choice. You felt that you did but in fact you did not.

**Marya:** I am just exploring this since I really don't know the details

**Chimeric:** Marya - does your idea of free will differ from Squish's?

**Marya:** Sorry, was just reading back to see what Squish said - I am not certain that we disagree just yet - since I am not clear on my own position ;)

**Chimeric:** ok

**Squish:** Marya - I think we are still on the same page so far. You believe in free will at what I call the proximate level

**Oswy:** I would like to introduce some ideas I got from reading David Papineau about consciousness. If that's OK. It helps us to get out of the box about FW and Determinism.

**Beezle:** so, do we not have any defenders here for freewill?

**Squish:** not at the ultimate level, it seems

**Oswy:** Papineau believes in what he calls Conceptual Dualism. This is nothing to do with Descartes.

**Beezle:** please explain

**Oswy:** He believes that we can conceptualise the world at two levels the third person objective level and the first person phenomenal level. It is the first person level that gives us the felt feeling of things the qualia the felt feeling of free will.

**Beezle:** philo of mind stuff ...

**Squish:** sounds pretty intact to me

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**Squish:** isn't that very much so what we've been saying?

**Chimeric:** yes, it seems to work with what we've been saying

**Beezle:** does lack of freewill entail fatalism?

**Oswy:** Ok he says that when we for instance sense the colour of a rose we in some way rerun the experience over to ourselves. Now Schopenhauer had a very similar idea about FW. He was a determinist and believed that we existed mentally at the edge of a complex set of causal events. This gave us a sense an illusion of you like from a first person view that all options were open and we were making a choice. it was as if we reviewed the options open to us. In fact the strongest determining cause made the choice for us.

**Squish:** isn't fatalism akin to determinism?

**Beezle:** there is a distinction between the two. Fatalism is what will be, whereas determined is what it is, I think

**Beezle:** fatalism tale: From Simon Blackburn's book, Think (the chapter on free-will (discussing fatalism)):

*The disciple of a Sufi of Baghdad was sitting in an inn one day when he heard two figures talking. He realized that one of them was the Angel of Death.*

*'I have several calls to make in this city,' said the Angel to his companion.*

*The terrified disciple concealed himself until the two had left. To escape Death, he hired the fastest horse he could, and rode day and night to the far distant desert city of Samarkand.*

*Meanwhile, Death met the disciple's teacher, and they talked of this and that.*

*'And where is your disciple, so-and-so?'* asked Death

*'I suppose he is at home, where he should be, studying,' said the Sufi.*

*'That is surprising,' said Death, 'for here he is on my list. And I have to collect him tomorrow, in Samarkand, of all places'.*

**Squish:** and also what will be, if everything follows causal laws

**Marya:** See, I think this has something to do with being in the future and looking back, and since we cannot do that ...

**Eolas:** I say that while possibly right on a functional level - in that assuming reality is real and our brains are capable of understanding it (which I believe to be true)...

**Oswy:** Can I just say in response to Marya that if we are living mentally on the edge of a complex deterministic wave then we are constantly in the present,

**Eolas:** our "free will" \*is\* in some way a product of biology and stimuli, on a deeper level. The difference between free and non-free will is staggering and incredibly important

**Beezle:** like gene-machine Darwinism, Eolas?

**Eolas:** yeah

**Beezle:** so we are determined by our genes?

**Eolas:** no

**Squish:** oh no

**Eolas:** that's not what I personally believe

**Chimeric:** So, Eolas, you agree that it is an illusion in Smilansky's sense?

**Eolas:** only to the degree that we don't fully control the stimuli and based on our \*current\* level of understanding of the brain

**Eolas:** but I don't agree with his conclusion

**Chimeric:** Yes, based on what we know of the world, after all, that's all we have right now.

**Eolas:** yeah... though our understanding - of the brain in particular - is highly incomplete, so I'm much more comfortable saying "I don't know" than trying to establish some certainty

**Eolas:** besides which

**Squish:** just a note about genetic determinism: we are the products of our genetic legacy, certainly, but the environment plays a huge role in "determining" who we are. But at the same time, as Eolas said, our sense of 'free will' can be considered physiological

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**Chimeric:** You don't agree because of the incompleteness of what we know?

**Eolas:** knowing "how" something works doesn't change the reality of the effect

**Beezle:** accepted and agreed

**Squish:** Eolas sounds like he's deciding to remain sceptical rather than disagreeing

**Beezle:** A combo of genetic determinism and 'blank-paper' social science (nurture)

**Chimeric:** What do you mean by that statement Eolas - knowing how doesn't change....

**Eolas:** just because what I think of as free will might have some chemical processes operating it doesn't change the fact that I believe it to be free... and \*that\* distinction is more important functionally (in my opinion) than whether or not I can control everything.

**Squish:** I find that position very agreeable :)

**Eolas:** I'm saying I think there's a combination of nature, nurture and independent thought behind all of my actions

**Chimeric:** Well, I think that is what Smilansky is saying. If it works, hold onto it - just call it by its rightful name.

**Eolas:** and that independent thought is "free will" at least, to me

**Beezle:** how independent is the independent thought, though?

**Oswy:** I agree with that the fact that I know something from an objective third person point of view does not change the fact that I have a first person feel that seems real.

**Marya:** one question - if we all share the same illusion - does that not make it real in a sense?

**Squish:** and, furthermore, a first-person perspective which is undeniably important

**Squish:** real in what sense, Marya?

**Beezle:** if we all believe the world is flat, that doesn't make the world flat....

**Marya:** no that's not what I mean Beezle

**Marya:** well, we only see the world the way we do due to our biological construct - what Dawkins calls a 'middle earth' perspective

**Marya:** one sec

**Beezle:** ok

**Oswy:** The same things are going on they are just conceptualised in different ways.

**Squish:** I am curious to know why free will at the ultimate level is even all that important to us

**Chimeric:** I will sum up first.

**Eolas:** oh... I think Marya's point about "sharing the illusion" is kind of what I was getting at

**Chimeric:** Smilansky's idea of free will as an illusion doesn't seem to be so frightening to us here. Squishy finds it acceptable in so far as it doesn't seem to interfere with her feeling that she is free and that she can still be happy even with this condition. Oswy is not happy with the word illusion, but only in so far as it may seem to trivialise our lives. But he agrees with Smilansky that the illusion is functional and practical and this is important. Beez find the idea of free will as illusion perfectly respectable. Marya wondered whether there might be something missing in the thesis. In conclusion, we all agree that we feel free, and this is the most important thing.

**Eolas:** Seems right... I'm not happy calling it an "illusion" either

**Marya:** perhaps a functional reality of sorts :)

**Eolas:** if the illusion is indistinguishable from consistent reality - then how does that matter to me?

**Chimeric:** I don't think it is indistinguishable. I think we just know it to be an illusion because of what we know about the world, physical and quantum laws and our own biological and chemical makeup, but keep it because it is functional.

**Chimeric:** 3. What aspects of yourself as a civilised, rational and dignified human being are altered or threatened by the idea that ultimately free will is an illusion? Is it your sense of creativity, your ability to love freely, or to claim a certain way of life freely? Something else? Can these traits, aspects or characteristics be salvaged even when, in line with Smilansky, free will is an illusion?

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**Oswy:** On question three I don't find Determinism threatening at all on the contrary I find it rational and liberating.

**Chimeric:** Squish - you want to start on that?

**Squish:** only "ultimate" free will has been labelled an illusion - and this is "free will" of the sort that doesn't exactly matter to me

**Eolas:** Well... if free will \*were\* an illusion, then I suppose I abdicate all my choices to emotional whims

**Chimeric:** Oh, I like that Oswy; you'll have to tell us why.

**Eolas:** and whatever I "feel" like doing is enough, since I don't control it anyway

**Squish:** My life and happiness depend on my proximate free will being free, so to speak

**Oswy:** I do quite a lot of painting and I write poetry from time to time. These are creative acts and I know they rest on a huge and complex interaction of determining events. This does not stop me from a first person point of view having a feeling of creativity. From a third person point of view I know that the complex of causation determining me is unique so what's to worry about? Again I can conceptualise my creativity or lack of it from two perspectives.

**Squish:** I pretty much agree with what Oswy said. Everything that gives my life meaning, and quality, depend on my personal, subjective sense of freedom. So long as no one is impeding me from doing as I please, then I can be happy. And I don't care if what I please is determined.

**Oswy:** When I look at my creativity objectively from a third person point of view I can see where I have failed to be unique and have become derivative. But I also see that I am building on the work of others and their traditions.

**Chimeric:** (well respond and elaborate and argue once everyone gets their first thoughts down)

**Marya:** What I meant was, we all see our computers in front of us because we are biologically structured to see it in the way that we see it, our computers, the room around us and the world we live in, is not technically structured the way we see it - for example if I was a small, almost microscopic creature I would see the world differently. So, since we all share the illusion of what the world 'seems' to be around us, then perhaps free will is, in the same sense an illusion - though it is a necessary illusion in order for us to function as 'middle world' creatures. So, while it may technically be illusory - it is a specific function of us as humans and is therefore a necessary shared (illusory) reality. So free will could then be just as real as the computer in front of me and it, being illusory in a technical sense, would therefore not cause a problem to each individual's sense of having a free will.

**Squish:** so far we all seem to be in agreement :)

**Eolas:** I disagree with some of what's been said - while my personal sense of individuality might not be changed whether or not I believe I have free will or \*actually\* have free will, since the net result in my behaviour is the same, if I believed that I \*didn't\* have free will (or if it was provable that I didn't), then matters would be entirely different. Primarily from the standpoint of ethics and my dealings with my environment

**Oswy:** Mayra, Nicholas Humphreys says we need qualia to give us a sense of your own self consciousness and that this is an important evolutionary advantage. Free will does the same sort of thing.

**Eolas:** If I am not actually free to choose my life, and I believe that, then there is no point in trying...

**Squish:** Eolas, are you referring to 'free will' at the ultimate level or at the personal level?

**Eolas:** both really... I think more than anything I'm trying to point out a paradox

**Beezle:** For me no aspects are threatened. Creativity, just like the behaviour of other animals in nature are methods of attracting mates: expressing one's genetic ability and therefore genetic quality, etc.

**Eolas:** Candide's Pangloss story is probably my favourite example of this point.

**Squish:** well we can also distinguish b/w personal choices, and the question of whether things could be another way in the universe

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**Chimeric:** Let's continue next week on the third question then and specifically responding to what Eolas is saying

**Eolas:** I'm good... I just need to figure out how to explain the paradox I'm trying to point out more clearly. I have more or less settled on this particular issue a while ago, and at some point just decided that even if it weren't "true" believing I have free will is crucial to my philosophies ... but also... by that being the choice, it has to be true :P, which is the paradox I guess. I'll be clearer later.

**Chimeric:** In response to Eolas, can we also reflect on whether "feeling" free is enough? I have more to say....but that for starters.

**Squish:** enough for what?

**Marya:** good stuff Eolas, I'm glad you came and look forward to hearing your views on this :)

**Beezle:** For my first time here, I enjoyed it! I'll be back for more!

