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WILLPOWER

Aristotelis Santas

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The problem of freewill and determinism is age-old. Philosophers have been writing about it for centuries, and yet it does not seem that much has been gained in the discussions over the years. The question of whether or not man is ultimately free or determined has not been satisfactorily answered. For any good argument in favor of freedom, we can find an equally good one favoring determinism. Even those who argue that freewill and determinism are compatible face strong counterarguments to their positions. This leads anyone who is familiar with the literature to at least wonder whether there is any hope of answering questions of freedom. Not only do the questions seem unanswerable, but the different solutions don't seem to offer different results of much consequence to human beings. That is, my knowing that I am ultimately (metaphysically) free, for instance, would not make me act much differently than my knowing that I am determined.¹ What is needed in the freedom literature is a set of questions whose solutions will have a bearing on our world — solutions which can be of use beyond the mere resolution of intellectual curiosities. Such a task might be accomplished by asking not *if* we are free, but *how* we are free and how we might become more or less free.² This will be my task. To accomplish it, I will embark on a discussion of what I will call willpower: what it is, how it works, and how we might get more or less of it.

I

Willpower is a strange sort of entity. No one

seems to know exactly what it is or how it works. Is it a faculty, a power of the mind, or what? Is it a kind of energy or force? Does it connect thoughts to actions? Is it a thought? Or is it an action? As a metaphysical entity, willpower is mysterious; but it need not be so mysterious. Many notions (thought, for one) have an unclear ontological status, but that does not prevent us from using working definitions of them. I propose the following working definitions of willpower: Willpower is (a) *the power or ability to refrain from doing something* (either before you do it or while in the midst of doing it) *even though you are strongly inclined to do it*; or (b) *the power or ability to continue doing something even though we are strongly inclined not to*. I hope this looks familiar enough. It should conform to our everyday usage. For instance, when we say, "Jane has a lot of willpower", we mean that she can readily do what she thinks is prudent or right (that is, once she has decided on what that is, despite some internal resistance. On the other hand, when we say, "Jack has no willpower", we mean that he has a hard time doing (or even beginning to do) what he thinks is prudent or right, when he has a strong desire or tendency to do otherwise.

It is my contention that Jane is more free than Jack, and that this is because Jane has more willpower. I will further contend that Jack is capable of becoming more free, even to the point of surpassing Jane's freedom, given the right conditions. Before I may defend these contentions, I must provide a thorough discussion of how willpower works and what it means to have it, and also explain how it relates to freedom.

II

We already have a working definition of willpower, but in order to get a good feel for what it

is, some elaboration is in order. Now, the ability under consideration applies not just to physical activities but to mental ones as well. Let me give some examples, first of a physical act, then, of a mental one.

There are situations where, because of some change in our normal environment, some physical habit becomes quite annoying. For instance, when there is a power failure and we walk into a dark room, we automatically flip the light switch, immediately feeling like a fool, or cursing our once useful habit. Sometimes, however, after a few of these incidents we "will" ourselves to stop flipping the switch; but the way in which we do this is quite interesting. We walk into the room, start to move our arm, and all of a sudden we stop the motion — sometimes even before the arm leaves our side. In such cases, we can even "feel" the impulses moving to the arm before they are repressed (or removed). This is a manifestation of willpower. We suspend⁴ an action, either before it gets started or before it may continue. In either case, the "momentum" of the action is overcome. At this point either of two things may happen. We either replace the action with another (we walk into the room and look for a candle), or decide to continue the action (since the power failure is now over). The important thing here is that the resulting action has been performed reflectively, not just out of blind habit. The person in question has actually *chosen* which act to perform rather than doing it automatically.

Now consider a mental activity: There are certain situations where a thought or a train of thoughts as it were knocks on our mind's door and we cannot keep it out. For instance, we may have witnessed a terrible automobile accident and have very vivid remembrances of it from time to time, even though we wish we could keep it out of our heads. Sometimes, however, we are capable of "willing" these thoughts away. Again, the way in which this is done is quite interesting. The thought is on its way, we can "see" it coming — though it is not entirely before us. As it starts to enter our full attention, we "intercept" it and "will" it to stop. Sometimes this is done after the thought is before us and sometimes before it can fully appear, though we can "feel" that it is coming, as we "feel" our arm begin to move. This too is a manifestation of willpower. We suspend the

thought, and as in physical cases, there is a certain momentum that is overcome. From there, we can either do or think of something else, or decide that this thought is worthy of some attention and continue it. In either case the given action is a result of a reflective decision to do that act. The thought in question has not occurred because it is a part of a train of thoughts, each bringing about its successor by means of a habitual association. It has occurred only because the agent decided that this thought was worth pursuing.

It seems strange to speak of stopping a thought before it starts. How can we see it coming? How can we stop it? Does this imply that we think the thought and not think it at the same time? After all, we must think the thought before we may deal with it. Two examples will show how we do this.

We all no doubt have heard advertising jingles and have occasionally gotten one "stuck" in our heads, running on like a broken record. Sometimes we have enough mental strength (willpower) to stop the jingle cold in its tracks. What happens when we do this? The obnoxious verse begins, but before it can continue long enough to gather momentum we stop it; or we may stop it in between repetitions. It is not that we think the thought and not think it at the same time; we think part of it and then stop the *train of thought*. (One interesting thing is that the earlier an attempt is made, the more likely it is that we can stop it.)

The accident is similar. It is not that we think of the accident scene and do not think of it at the same time; rather, there is a certain train of thoughts, each connected in a series just as the original events were. As the scene begins to unfold — you remember riding along before the accident, unaware of what is to ensue — you decide to halt the train, to break the series, to suspend the thought until you can furnish a replacement. Perhaps the key here is to stop the train before it can "get hold of you"; that is, before it can affect you emotionally. (Once that happens, you are too busy suffering to focus on stopping it.)

At this point, something more needs to be said about the suspension willpower involves. In particular, what does it mean to maintain a suspension, or fail to maintain one? Well, the suspension I speak of is a conscious effort to stop the automatic activity until we decide either to continue the

action (but not automatically; rather, reflectively) or to replace it with another. For instance, upon realizing that the power failure is over, we decide to flip the switch; this time the action is resumed not because of any momentum (from habit), but because we have decided to do so. If, on the other hand, we know that the power is still off, we decide to not flip the switch and continue walking into the room to find the candles. So, to say that we are maintaining a suspension is to say that for the moment we are not acting automatically, but are reflecting on our possibilities before we perform any further action. To say a suspension was attempted but failed is to say that the automatic activity, though interrupted, soon continued its normal path.

III

Willpower gives us practical freedom. Insofar as we are consciously and reflectively making our decisions we are free; this holds for thoughts as well as for other actions. This is in line with the traditional views on freedom, but there are some differences. I am not saying that having willpower *makes* us free (in the metaphysical sense); rather, I am saying that we are free insofar as we are consciously choosing what to do, and we always make such a choice when we exercise willpower. Metaphysically speaking, this willpower could either be a (partial) cause of our freedom, or a manifestation of it. We cannot know which of these it is, nor, I believe, is that an important question; for whether or not we are ultimately metaphysically free is of little consequence to our daily existence. Practically speaking, exercising willpower makes us free since it allows us to suspend an otherwise automatic activity and to reflectively *choose* which action to perform. If this does not fully account for freedom (which, by the way, I am sure it does not), it at least accounts for a very beneficial aspect of it. Being able to overcome habits or dispositions which, for at least the time being, are unnecessary, counterproductive, or painful, and then choose an action on a rational basis, is a very valuable form of freedom.

This is the type of freedom that needs to be discussed, for not only does it have a direct impact on our lives, it is also something which we can control. In order to explain *how* we may control

our freedom, and hence our lives, a brief digression is in order.

IV

Human activities are largely automatic. In fact, automatic activities account for a great majority of what we do. Our habits and dispositions (either innate or learned) rule most of our lives. For example, most of us automatically look two ways before we cross a street. We normally walk without thinking about it. Some of us talk without giving a thought to what we say. For the most part, this is to our advantage. If we had to think about every step we took in a day, we would not have the time for more interesting activity — not to mention the energy. It would be misleading, however, to say that we are mostly unfree. Absolute freedom might require that for any given activity, we would reflectively choose what to do. But who wants that kind of freedom? Who wants to think out every action? I believe the kind of freedom we are looking for is one which does allow us to reflectively decide on activities, but only when this seems desirable. Willpower allows us to suspend what we are doing so that we can reflect and then decide. It also allows us to refrain from doing what we should not do. Because of this, it not only closes off what is worse, it also opens up possibilities for what is better. In the light switch example, the habit of flipping the switch upon entering the room is suspended (we refrain from the unnecessary activity) to make room for a more useful action (searching for candles). Our accident example is not so trivial. Here we refrain from an otherwise automatic process (whatever it is), which happens to be unnecessary, counterproductive, and painful (at least in this circumstance), in order to make room for a better activity (whatever that may be).

In order to get along in the world we need both the capacity to act automatically in familiar situations and the capacity to override the automatic response whenever the situation is different enough to warrant a change in behavior. An individual who can only run on "automatic pilot" is going to have severe problems unless his living conditions are extremely stable. On the other hand, an individual with no capacity to run automatically will also suffer severe problems un-

less his living conditions are in complete flux. (Even so, his life would be chaotic at best and paralytic at worst: chaotic because everything would always be new; paralytic because he would always be thinking before he acted, and thinking about *how* he should think before he acts, etc.) Since our particular environments fall somewhere between complete constancy and flux (each varying with the individual), the freedom we want is one which will give us the best chance of adapting happily to our surroundings.⁵ As we shall see, controlling our freedom will consist in exercising the amount of willpower necessary to adapt us happily to our living conditions.

V

I now want to ask what is meant by a lack of willpower? This should be easy enough to see, given what was said above. We have a lack of willpower either when we start to suspend a given activity and cannot, or when we do not even think about suspending the activity. The former might be called *weakness of the will* (or incontinence), and the latter simply an *absence of willpower* (or intemperance), though these stray somewhat from the traditional meanings.⁶ In either case, this can occur mentally as well as physically. For instance, when someone is on a diet, that individual may know that he should not reach for that bowl of ice cream, but he just cannot resist and takes it anyway — a suspension is attempted but cannot be sustained. Similarly, when that terrible memory of the auto accident comes around, you may try to keep it out of your head but not be able to. Again a suspension is attempted but fails. On the other hand, sometimes no suspension is even attempted. It doesn't even occur to some individuals that a given automatic activity needs an evaluation (or reevaluation). They continue on automatic pilot and suffer for it. An example is someone who unreflectively eats fatty meats for forty years and then dies of colon cancer. Another is someone who unquestioningly believes that all women are superficial and, consequently, never has happy or productive relationships with women.

VI

I now want to ask how some people are more free than others; which degree of freedom is

desirable; and how we can increase or decrease our degree of freedom to suit our needs. First of all, I believe the variation in freedoms from individual to individual is directly related to the amounts of willpower these individuals exercise. I also believe that practical freedom is the ability not just to choose, but to *reflectively* choose one's activities. Because of this, willpower has everything to do with how free one is. Given that humans have the tendency to behave automatically, either through habits or dispositions, willpower is the key to reflective behavior since it halts the automatic activity to make room for reflection. Without willpower, an individual can make very few choices and thus may not be able to fully control his life; this would be especially harmful if his particular life situation requires a constant reevaluation of automatic activity.

By and large we all have the capacity to reflectively choose our actions; but this does not guarantee that we will all use it to the same degree. Some of us are ruled much more by habits and inclinations than others. So in one sense we are all equally free; we all have the capacity for reflective behavior. In another (and I think more important) sense, our particular freedoms vary because some of us act more automatically, and some of us act more reflectively. What willpower does is allow us to check automatic activity when doing so is desirable. Since it has directly to do with transforming automatic activities into reflective ones, on this account of freedom, it has directly to do with how much freedom one possesses.

Which degree of freedom is most desirable will depend on the individual. I am not going to extoll the virtues of the reflective existence here.⁷ Different living conditions require different degrees of reflectivity. I know as many hyper-reflective individuals as I do hypo-reflective ones, and I know some people who could stand to be more reflective in some areas and less reflective in others. Deciding which degree is better *in general* is either prohibitively complex or impossible.⁸ There are, however, specific cases where we know that something is wrong, that something needs to change. I shall now discuss how we may effect that change.

How can we increase our degree of freedom? The answer is to develop our willpower, but what does this involve? This question will have to be

answered in a twofold manner since a lack of willpower is the result of at least one of two things. We must first ask, how might one overcome weakness of the will? And then, how might one come to use willpower more often? I believe that the single thing which makes this possible (but by no means easy) is that willpower is a general sort of ability. That is, there are not separate forms of willpower for different types of activities. There is only one form of willpower, and that is the ability to suspend an activity — *any* activity — until reflection determines the right course of action. Because of this, given that someone has this power at all, he will be able to increase the scope of the power. Some situations are much easier to deal with (i.e., sustain a suspension in) than others; and which situations are easier will depend on who we are considering.

Let us return to our two friends Jane and Jack and for the sake of simplicity, say that they are fraternal twins with the same living conditions. Jane has more willpower than Jack and given their relatively similar surroundings, her degree of freedom is more advantageous than his. That is, the degree of constancy and flux are such that her greater degree of willpower makes life easier for her, and his lesser degree makes it harder for him. But they are not totally dissimilar. Neither Jane nor Jack have any problems with consciously deciding on whether or not to eat ice cream; but on the other hand, Jack cannot keep that terrible accident out of his head whereas Jane can. How can Jack make his life easier? How can he develop his willpower to equal that of Jane?

The key here is that he has some degree of willpower. What he needs to do is apply this ability to a greater range of actions, starting with those of lesser difficulty and working towards the harder ones. It is these harder cases where *weakness* of the will occurs, for here the individual tries to apply his willpower but is unable to do so (at least not completely). Here is where mental development resembles physical training. Willpower seems to behave like a muscle. It will do a certain amount of work for us, and it will do so efficiently provided that it is used to that particular activity; but when we give it a task that it is not used to performing, it stresses and strains and if the task is too far removed from the usual, the muscle fails. Notice, however, that this does not

leave us in a hopeless situation. We can develop the muscle by increasing its work load slowly and steadily, until it is eventually able to perform that most difficult task. Also notice that there are limits to the muscle, depending on who (or what) it belongs to. Some of us are better endowed from the start and require less work to do the same job. Others of us may develop the ability, but only after some difficulty.⁹

I believe that willpower works in a completely analogous way. We may not be able to will certain things now, but we could if we took the time to slowly build up this power. Jack will have to practice willing if he wants to be like Jane. He will have to (as it were) exercise his brain.¹⁰ As his abilities increase, he will be able to attempt more and more difficult suspensions, until finally he will be able to *choose* whether or not that scene will enter his head. How can Jack exercise his brain? Well, he will have to become more reflective in his actions. He will have to interrupt those automatic activities once in a while and get used to choosing his actions more often.¹¹ For example, he may decide to start thinking before he flips on a light switch each time he enters the room. He may ask himself, "What am I doing?" and "Why am I doing this?" and then continue the action, but out of choice. Or he may practice removing those commercial jingles out of his head. These tasks that Jack is practicing on are all relatively simple ones. He is starting out small, just as a smart weightlifter would. As he progresses, he will take on more and more difficult tasks; but for the time being he must begin where he can.

On the other hand, Jack does not want to get carried away with this power. If he tries to apply it in too many areas, he may be wasting his time on the power itself, just like some of our friends at the health spa who spend all of their time lifting weights, just to keep up those bulky muscles. Jack wants to develop his willpower only to the extent that he needs to to make his life more livable. If he develops it more than he needs, then he will either lose it, or he will retain it only at the cost of making his life more tiresome.

The hypothesis that willpower behaves like a muscle seems sound. This is mainly because of its explanatory force, but there is also some empirical evidence. First of all, accepting it explains why one cannot start out with the more difficult

tasks of willing. For example, no one would advise a newly reformed alcoholic to build up his resistance to temptation by going into a bar and staying there for several hours. That advice, if given to anyone, would be given to someone who has successfully avoided alcohol for a number of years. Moreover, this hypothesis also accounts for why there are varying degrees of willpower — why, for instance, Jane can have more than Jack; and it also accounts for why one can have different degrees of willpower at different times in his life. This seems more plausible than saying that willpower is simply a matter of choice. Under such a view, we would not be able to account for the gap between what we want to do and what we in fact do. We would simply have to tell our alcoholic that if he wants to quit drinking, then just quit.

The hypothesis also makes sense empirically. In everyday experience we can see that both muscular development and behavioral development in general are a matter of training and habit. We see that “practice makes perfect” just as easily in one case as in the other.¹² It seems that control of any type of behavior, be it muscular, emotional, or reflective, is subject to this “rule” of development. In fact, if we look at popular psychology — contemporary man’s main source for developmental rules — we can see that it is full of tips for self-improvement which rely on this parallel (this has already been noted with William James). The only difference is that psychologists tend to use the word ‘inhibit’ instead of ‘suspend’.

So, we can control our degree of (practical) freedom by increasing or decreasing the amount of willpower we exercise. The increasing can be done by slowly developing our willpower, starting with relatively simple tasks, and building to the more difficult ones. This will not only help us to sustain the suspensions we attempt, but it will also get us used to employing willpower in more areas of our lives, so we may be less likely to suffer from the problems of an unreflective life. The decreasing can be done by “letting yourself go”. For the individual who suffers from the problems of hyper-reflectivity, the solution is to just act, and to get out of the habit of always stopping oneself to reflect on whether this should be done. After all, the greatest amount of (practical) freedom is not necessarily the best amount. What is

the best depends on the particular living conditions of the person in question. What we want is a balance between automatic and reflective behavior.¹³ Without this balance, individuals will be automata on one extreme and paralytics on the other.

VII

Before closing, I would like to treat a common belief which is a possible objection to the concept of willpower and the so-called weakness of the will. Many believe that this is not really a weakness, but the result of a concealed set of priorities. For example, they would say that when you reach for that bowl of ice cream, in spite of what you know is best, you are only expressing a concealed sense of what is important to you. In this case the taste of that ice cream was more important (at least at the time) than any fear of possible repercussions. Similarly, when you allow that accident scene to crash into your thoughts, you somehow place more value on conceiving such thoughts than on ignoring them.

I have two replies to this objection. First of all, this particular view of desire renders the concept of desire useless. If every action we (willingly) perform is desired, then what does it mean to say I desired to do something, other than that I did it? If someone asked Jack why he stole that car, and he replied, “Because I wanted to”, the questioner, on this view would have to say, “Yes, of course”. But this is not how we actually treat such matters. The answer “Because I wanted to” would not just be a triviality; it would be very useful piece of information. It would let us know something about Jack’s sense of social obligation (or lack of it).

Secondly, when we act, we do not always do what is most desirable. The case of the auto accident is a good example. Even if we are already cautious drivers and have no need to reflect on mangled flesh, we can still experience an inability to block out that horrible image. How can we account for this? We do not *desire* to visualize this gruesome scene. Our most intense desire may be to avoid such an image. It appears that we can only explain this by our inability to sustain a suspension, to suspend this particular thought process. Somehow we cannot quite get the door

shut, and like a pesky salesman, once its foot is in the door, you cannot keep it out.

VIII

The traditional discussions of freedom have focussed so much on the metaphysical issues that they have largely or entirely missed the important human problems involved in having and not having freedom, not to mention what kind of remedies may be offered for these problems. We may never

know whether we act under the grip of necessity. And I may not know if exercising my willpower is a product of "free will" or of some particle's interaction with my brain; but I do know that happiness comes from being able to cope with oneself and one's surroundings. Since willpower and the freedom associated with it are directly related to this, our discussion seems to be worthwhile. If nothing else, it provides us with solutions to problems we can care about.

FOOTNOTES

1. There is an important qualification here. If the discussion is couched in terms of whether or not we will go to hell for our misdeeds on earth, then we will care about the answer to this question. If God has determined us to sin, and hence has doomed us to eternal damnation from the start, we may not want to worship such a god. If, on the other hand, we have freewill, it would not seem so unfair to punish the unrepenting sinners. But this is not my concern here. I believe that this type of discussion is bankrupt as well, whether you are a theist or atheist.
2. Although in the final analysis, I don't believe that I need to presuppose that we *are* (metaphysically) free, I do in fact hold this view (at least to the degree that the question makes sense). In any case, that is not the issue here.
3. It seems strange to say that we might want to be *less* free, but I think there is a degree of freedom beyond which we do not want. This, I hope, will become clear in what follows.
4. The suspension I will henceforth discuss is derived from Locke's discussion of the will. He too believed that at least part of our freedom was a function of our ability to suspend an action. One important difference between our views, however, is that he viewed the will as some sort of faculty of the mind, while I am only concerned with the *phenomenon* of our willing. For his discussion, see Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. II, Chap. XXI. For a more modern discussion of the will, see William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1983), Chap. XXVI, esp. p. 1185 (pp. 582-3 in the earlier editions).
5. This should look familiar. In Bk. II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle proposes the same general methodology in his discussion of the mean. I take this method to be quite sound, though I believe Aristotle did not take it far enough in its application. This should become apparent in my discussion of degrees of reflectivity (see below, section VI).
6. In what follows I will take up Aristotle's discussion of moral weakness from Bk. VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, by and large accepting his solution to the problem; but I will also strike out on my own and develop a further solution.
7. Ample treatment can be found in both Aristotle (*Nic. Ethics*, Bks. I & X) and Mill (*Utilitarianism*, Chap. II) in their discussions of the so-called higher pleasures.
8. This is a good place to employ the Aristote-

lian maxim: Do not expect any more precision than the subject matter admits.

9. This echoes yet another feature of the golden mean — it will always be determined by the individual's particular dispositions.
10. A similar point is made by James in his discussion of moral import of habit. One of his practical maxims on this subject is that in the process of changing a habit, we must take every opportunity to reinforce the change. The more we do this, the better we shall become at effecting desired changes in our lives. See James, Chap. IV, esp. p. 128 (pp. 123-4 in the older editions).
11. This mirrors another one of James' maxims: "Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day" (p. 130; 125-6 in older editions).
12. My evidence here is obviously phenomono-

logical, and not physicalistic. My interest is not to establish some kind of physical connection between "mind" and muscle, but to describe and explain a phenomenon with which we are all familiar. Anyone who has taken the pains to train himself physically and/or emotionally can see that the development requires slow and steady training, and that who you are and what situations you are in will determine how much training is needed.

13. This is one case that Aristotle does not apply the mean to, namely, what degree of reflectivity one should engage in. This is no doubt due to Aristotle's construal of human beings as essentially rational, and his inevitable bias towards the contemplative life. Though I largely agree that the reflective existence is worthwhile, I cannot maintain that the contemplative life in general *must* be better. Here is where Aristotle and I part.