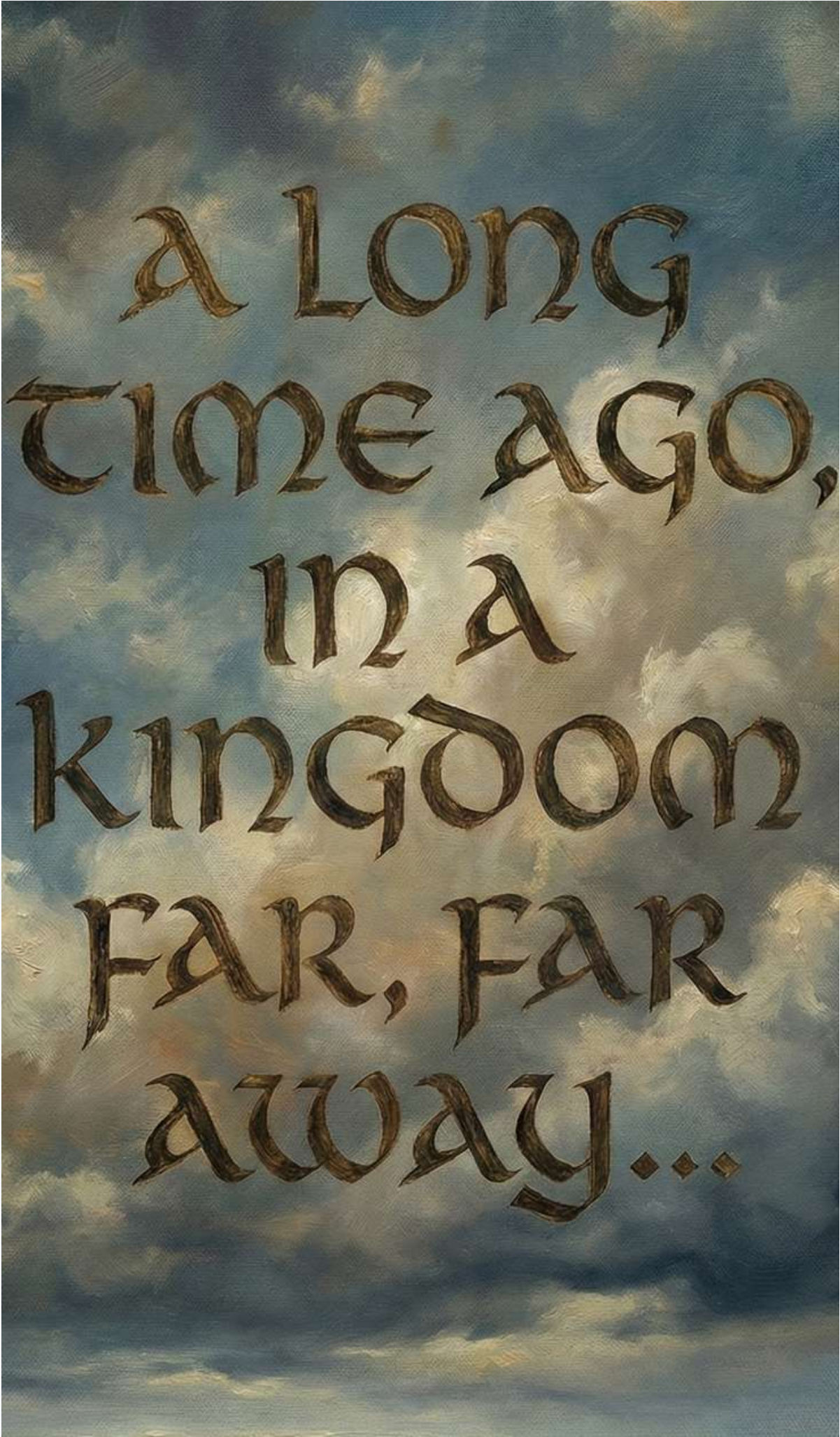


Q1-2026 EDITION

Free will





A LONG
TIME AGO,
IN A
KINGDOM
FAR, FAR
AWAY...

One day, Augustine of Hippo—a brilliant mind of his time—was walking the shore, contemplating the mystery of the Trinity. He wondered: How could God be **three and one** at the same time?

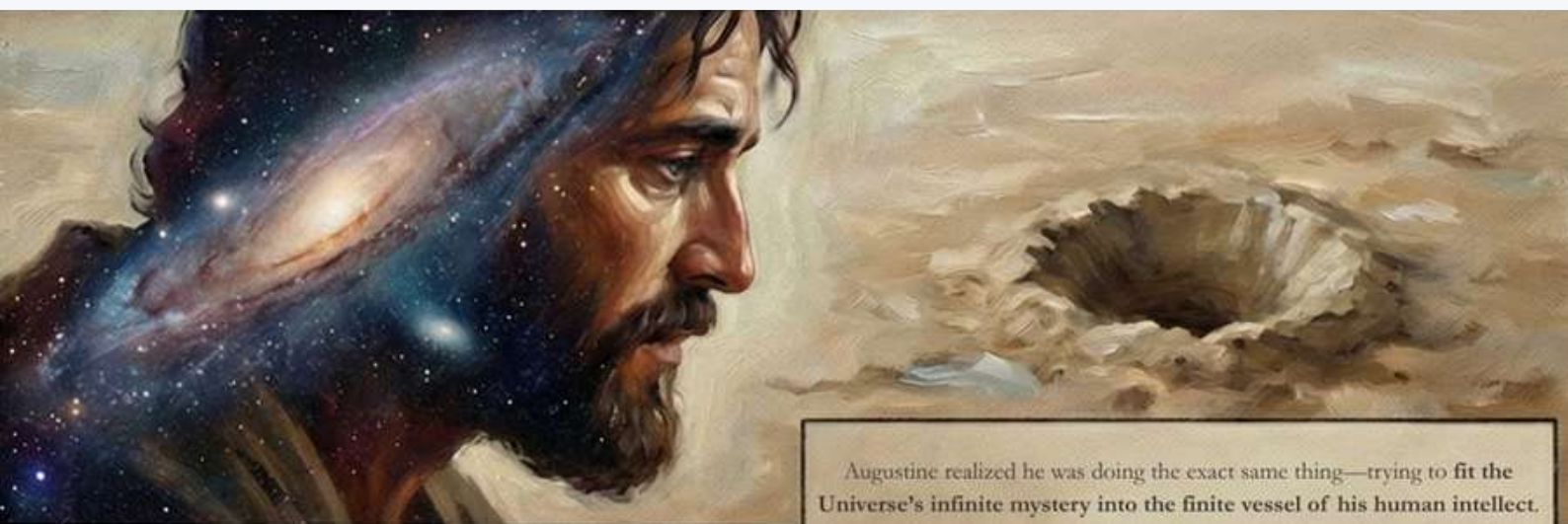


As he paced the shore, lost in circles of logic, he saw a young boy running back and forth between the waves and the sand.



The boy had dug a small hole in the sand. He would run to the ocean, fill a seashell with water, run back, and pour it into the hole.





... How does the story feel to you?

It's true that the story has roots in a religious tradition. However, I believe the feeling it captures is universal—specifically, the feeling of **a finite mind trying to wrap itself around an infinite mystery.**

In our modern age, we have mapped the stars and decoded the human genome. Yet, for all our progress, we remain haunted by a few stubborn questions that science hasn't managed to solve. One of them—which I would like us to reflect on in this edition—is **Free Will.**

It is perhaps the most frustrating debate in history. Trying to understand if we truly have agency—if we are the authors of our own lives—often feels exactly like that boy on the beach: trying to pour the massive ocean of the universe into the tiny seashell of our daily logic.

If you have ever lain awake at night wondering if you are truly in control, or if thinking about this topic makes you feel like your brain is about to explode, please know: **you are not alone.**

That confusion isn't a dead end. In fact, it is exactly where the journey toward **a more humble, compassionate, and authentic life** begins.

So, let's stop standing on the shore. Let's wade in together, shall we?

Jonathan M. Pham

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THE PARADOX OF FREE WILL



It is hard to imagine how free will can operate if our behavior is determined by physical law.

Stephen Hawking

1.1. DO WE HAVE FREE WILL?

We live our lives in two completely different worlds. In fact, most of us toggle between them a dozen times before breakfast without even noticing.

#1: World of the Machine

Imagine your coffee machine breaks tomorrow morning. You press the button, and nothing happens.

Do you get angry at the machine? Do you accuse it of being “lazy” or “immoral”?

Of course not. You assume there must be a cause. Maybe a fuse blew. Or maybe a wire came loose.

You accept that the machine is part of a “clockwork” universe governed by physics. If you fix the cause, you fix the result.

#2: World of the Captain

Ten minutes later, you sit down to work, but instead, you scroll through social media for an hour. Or you snap at your partner because you are stressed.

Suddenly, the logic changes. You don’t look for a “loose wire” in your brain.

You feel guilt. You blame yourself. You feel an intuitive sense deep down that you could have done otherwise.

THE WORLD OF THE MACHINE



THE WORLD OF THE CAPTAIN



1.1. DO WE HAVE FREE WILL?

Nobody is exempt from this tension. We view the universe—from the stars to our toasters—as a chain of cause & effect. But when it comes to us, we feel like the “Captain of the Ship,” steering our vessel freely through the waves.

In other words, humanity lives in the **intersection of physics and poetry**.

So, which view is true?

Is the “You” reading this article truly the ultimate originator of your thoughts? Or are you just a passenger—a conscious observer watching a movie that was filmed and edited at the moment of the Big Bang?

This isn’t just a logic puzzle for philosophy professors in ivory towers. The answer to this existential question dictates everything about **how we live**.

It shapes how we judge criminals (are they evil, or just broken?).

It shapes how we forgive our pa-

rents (did they choose to hurt us, or were they acting out their own trauma?).

And above all, it shapes how we view our own achievements and failures.

The good news is: **We are NOT here to solve the debate.**

Brilliant minds, from the ancient Stoics to modern neuroscientists, have deadlocked on the argument for centuries. We are not trying to solve the math of the universe here.

Instead, our goal is to **find a pragmatic way to live**.

If we lean too far into “Total Control,” we become arrogant judges of others and anxious wrecks about ourselves.

On the other hand, if we lean too far into “No Free Will,” we risk becoming apathetic passengers, drifting through life like leaves in the wind.

For my part, I believe there is a

1.1. DO WE HAVE FREE WILL?

“Middle Way”. A way that allows us to **look at the science without losing our souls**. To accept the hand of cards we were dealt, while still playing it with courage.

It’s a view that allows us to get back to life—connecting with loved ones, doing work, and existing not as robots, but as the “salt and light” of the world.

But first... let us look at why the scientists think we might be robots after all.

1.2. THE ATTACK ON AGENCY

Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making.

Sam Harris

For centuries, we humans believed we were the kings of our own castles. We sat at the center of existence, believing the sun revolved around us—and that we were the undisputed masters of our own minds.

But slowly, science has surrounded the castle, taking away our territory piece by piece.

First, astronomy proved we weren't the center of the universe. Then, biology concluded we were evolved animals, not divine statues. And now, neuroscience and physics are knocking on the door of the last room we have left: **our own minds**.

They come bearing a difficult message: **The “feeling” of freedom you have might just be a trick of the light.**

The physics argument: The unbroken chain

The first battering ram against free will comes from simple physics. It is the idea of the “Clockwork Universe,” often personified by a concept called Laplace's Demon.

Imagine a giant pool table. If you hit the cue ball (the “break shot”) the balls scatter. If you knew the exact position of every ball, the friction of the table, the force of the hit, you could—using the laws of physics—predict exactly where every ball would end up. They have **no choice**. They are just **obeying the laws of motion**.

Now, let's apply that to the universe. The Big Bang was the ultimate “break shot.” It sent matter hurling through space. Over 13.8 billion years, that matter formed stars, planets, and eventually you

Since the brain is made of atoms, and atoms obey the laws of physics, every electrical impulse in

1.2. THE ATTACK ON AGENCY

your head right now is arguably just the result of a chain of collisions that started at the beginning of time.

From this view, you did not “choose” to read this sentence. The laws of physics determined you would read it billions of years ago. You are just watching the dominoes fall.



Some of you might be shouting at the screen right now: “But what about Quantum Mechanics? Isn’t the universe random?”

It is true that modern physics has moved past Newton’s rigid ‘Clockwork Universe’. We now know that at the subatomic level, things are probabilistic, not certain.

But be careful not to mistake

randomness for freedom. If your choices are merely the result of random quantum fluctuations, you are still, technically, NOT in control—you are just a dice roll rather than a domino. The problem of agency remains.

The biological argument: The “Ovarian Lottery”

This is that human freedom, which all boast that they possess, and which consists solely in the fact, that men are conscious of their own desire, but are ignorant of the causes whereby that desire has been determined.

Baruch Spinoza

“Okay,” you might say. “But I’m not a billiard ball. I’m a complex human being with a personality.”

This brings us to the second challenge: **Biology**.

We tend to think our personality is “Us”—something we crafted. But thinkers like Stanford neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky argue

1.2. THE ATTACK ON AGENCY

that biology and environment eliminate the room for a “ghost in the machine”.

Think about Warren Buffett’s theory of the “Ovarian Lottery.” You did not choose your parents. You did not choose your genes. You did not choose whether you were born in a war zone or a suburb. You didn’t choose the trauma you suffered at age five, or the nutrition you received at age ten.

Yet, these are **the exact things that built your brain**.

If your “choices” today are based on your personality, and your personality was decided by genes and environments you did not choose, **can you really claim credit for the result?**

It’s like being dealt a hand of cards. You are holding the cards, yes. But the deck was shuffled and dealt long before you sat at the table.

**The neuroscience argument:
The delayed broadcast**

In the 1980s, a researcher named Benjamin Libet conducted a set of experiments. He asked participants to move their fingers whenever they felt like it, while he monitored their brain activity.

The results were unsettling. The brain scans showed that **the brain prepared to move the finger before the participants were consciously aware of their decision to move it**. The “readiness potential” fired milliseconds before the “I decided” thought appeared.

In other words, our conscious mind—the voice in your head saying “I decided to do this”—might just be a narrator telling a story **after the fact**.

We like to think we are the King ruling the country. But it seems we might actually be a King who is asleep, while the Generals (our subconscious biology) send the troops to war.

The King wakes up later, sees the troops moving, and says, “Yes, I ordered that.”

1.2. THE ATTACK ON AGENCY

The logical deconstruction: The “Tiny Man” fallacy

*You are not controlling the storm, and you are not lost in it.
You are the storm.*

Sam Harris

Now, we arrive at the logical problem. When we say “I have free will,” **who is the “I”**?

We intuitively feel like there is a “Controller” or an “Owner of the Will” sitting somewhere behind our eyes, pulling the levers. But let’s look for him.

If you lose an arm, you are still “You.” If you lose a leg, you are still “You”. But **where does the “You” live?**

If we keep removing parts, we eventually get to the brain. But the brain is just tissue, neurons, and chemistry. There is no “Tiny Man” (Homunculus) sitting inside the brain piloting the ship.

There is no “Owner.” There is only the ship (the biological org-

anism) reacting to the ocean (the environment).

The “You” that feels in control is, perhaps, just a **belief**—a **necessary fantasy** the brain creates to make sense of its actions.



FACING THE EXISTENTIAL ABYSS



Nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

2.1. ABSOLUTE FREEDOM IS TERRIFYING

If physics determines the atoms, biology determines the temperament, and the brain decides before we know it... what is left?

This line of thinking leads us to what is called the “Abyss”—the feeling that **we might just be biological robots suffering from a delusion of grandeur**. It feels like a loss of humanity.

It's a thought that easily drives one to despair. Some may outright reject it and say: “No, we DO have the freedom to choose! I am the master of my fate!”

That seems fair enough. But what if we pause for a moment to reflect on this question?

“If we did have total freedom... would we actually WANT it?”

The burden of no excuses

Now, let us assume the scientists are wrong and we are truly free.

In that case, we face a problem that is arguably even scarier: **Total Responsibility**.

The philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once commented:

*“**Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.**”*

Notice the word “condemned”. Sartre didn't say we are “blessed” to be free. He argued that because we did not create ourselves, yet we are thrown into a world where we are responsible for everything we do, **freedom is a heavy burden**.

If you are free, you have no excuses. You cannot say, “My nature/ passion made me do it.”

Every time you act, **you are choosing your own nature**. If you are angry, it is because you **chose to be angry** rather than to restrain yourself.

If you fail, there is no “System” to blame. The failure is YOURS.

And with responsibility comes this feeling which existential philosophers called **Angst**.

2.1. ABSOLUTE FREEDOM IS TERRIFYING

The anxiety of infinite choice

Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.

Søren Kierkegaard

Let's say you are standing on the edge of a high cliff. You feel anxiety not just because you might accidentally fall (which is a deterministic fear, like gravity). Rather, it's because you realize that **you are free to jump**.

The only thing stopping you is... **you**.

That vertigo—that realization of *infinite possibility*—is dizzying. In fact, it is so uncomfortable that many of us subconsciously try to escape it.



I happen to know someone per-

sonally who operates this way. Whenever a conflict arises in the family, instead of reasoning fairly or owning their part in the mess, they would retreat immediately into the role of the “oppressed”. They would bring up past traumas that have nothing to do with the current argument, or say things like, “I don’t know, maybe I’m just stupid...”

Why do they do this?

Because **playing the victim is safe**. It absolves them of the need to solve the problem or change their behavior.

Sartre called this “**Bad Faith**” (*mauvaise foi*). It is the lie we tell ourselves that we have no choice. We say things like,

- “I know this isn’t the best way to do it, but my boss told me to do so,” or
- “I had to stay at this job for the stability”

By *pretending* to be an **object**—a cog in the machine—we escape the dizziness of being a **subject**.

2.1. ABSOLUTE FREEDOM IS TERRIFYING

The collapse of the “Old Laws”

This anxiety is sharper today than ever before. For most of history, humans didn't have to “create” their own meaning. The “Old Laws” did it for them. Religion told you what was good; tradition who to marry; the social structure your place.

But in the modern era, those fragile “laws” have been shattered.

The Enlightenment and scientific progress invalidated many institutional theories humanity once assumed were absolute.

Today, technological advances are reshaping everything, deleting jobs once considered prestigious—while creating new ones that didn't exist a decade ago.

The script is gone. We are improvising. And when we ask, “What should I do?”, **the universe remains silent.**

Three responses to the “Abyss”

So, how do we live then?

Existential philosophers proposed that we could look to three “Heroes” to show us the way.

- The Knight of Faith

In the 19th century, the philosopher Hegel concluded that logic and history formed a “System” that could explain everything. This view—though widely hailed at the time—was rejected by Søren Kierkegaard, considered the “father of existentialism”.

Kierkegaard argued that for the things that actually matter—love, meaning, God—**proof is useless.** When it comes to such things, one must act like a “Knight of Faith” and take a “leap of faith”—not because they have scientific proof or logical certainty, but because they **have passion.**

In other words, they *risk everything on a commitment without a guarantee.*

- The Übermensch

Friedrich Nietzsche, another existential philosopher, looked at

2.1. ABSOLUTE FREEDOM IS TERRIFYING

the collapse of religious structure at his time and declared, “God is dead”. Rather than a celebration, his statement was a warning that the external rulebook was gone.

His hero, the Übermensch (Overman), doesn’t look for a new “System” to tell him what is good. He has the courage to “dance on the edge of the abyss”.

He realizes he is **the author of his own life**—that he creates his own values, and that he is capable of *transforming the chaos of existence into something beautiful*.

- The Absurd Hero

Years later, Albert Camus took it

a step further. He believed that the universe is silent and indifferent, and looking for meaning in it is “Absurd”. According to him, we should look up to the model of Sisyphus—the king condemned by the Greek gods to push a boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, forever.

Sisyphus knows his task is futile (the rock will always roll down), but he pushes it anyway. His freedom—and victory—lies in his *refusal to surrender to the silence*.

The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Albert Camus

THE ABSURD HERO VS. RELATED FIGURES



KNIGHT OF FAITH
(Kierkegaard)



Chooses **TRUST**.
Surrenders to Higher Power.



ABSURD HERO
(Camus)



Chooses **DEFIANCE**.
Endures the Present.



ÜBERMENSCH
(Nietzsche)



Chooses **CREATION**.
Focuses on Future Legacy.

2.1. ABSOLUTE FREEDOM IS TERRIFYING

Nihilism or opportunity?

There is a danger we should be aware of here. If we realize the “System” isn’t watching, we risk falling into Nihilism (“*If nothing matters, why bother?*”) or hedonism (“*If God did not exist, everything would be permitted*” – to quote Dostoevsky).

But this “Terror of Freedom” is also **our greatest opportunity**.

If you are forced to be good—like the protagonist in *A Clockwork Orange* who is conditioned to be unable to choose violence—you **aren’t actually “good”**. You are just a broken machine.

Authenticity is the flip side of free will. It allows us to tear off the “social masks” and **be real**.

As the author C.S. Lewis noted,

*“Free will though it makes evil possible, is also **the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having.**”*

We have to choose: **Do we want**

the safety of the robot, or the risk of the lover?



2.2. THE RISKS OF TOTAL DETERMINISM

What is the point of so many admonitions, so many precepts, so many threats, so many exhortations, so many expostulations, if of ourselves we do nothing?

Erasmus

I suppose that contemplating the “Abyss of Freedom” may have given you a panic attack. Some of you might be thinking:

“You know what? Maybe the scientists were right. Maybe I am just a biological robot. Maybe none of this is my fault.”

There is indeed a feeling of comfort in thinking that way. It is tempting to believe we are just products of our environment—because **it absolves us of guilt.**

But before you sign up for that worldview, remember this. While the cage of determinism is comfortable, **it is STILL a cage.**

“It’s not my fault”

Fear is the path to the dark side.

Yoda, ‘Star Wars’

The immediate appeal of Hard Determinism is that it erases shame. If you fail, it was because of your genetics. If you lash out, it was because of your trauma.

But there is a high price for it: **Apathy.**

If you accept that you have no real control, you *surrender your agency.*

If you believe you are helpless—that you are just a result of inputs and outputs—it becomes a **self-fulfilling prophecy.** You stop trying to improve your life, because (let’s be real) you feel the outcome is already fixed.

By refusing to take the blame, you also inadvertently *refuse the power to change.*

We do not suffer from the shock of our experiences—the

2.2. THE RISKS OF TOTAL DETERMINISM

*so-called trauma—but instead **we make out of them whatever suits our purposes.** We are not determined by our experiences, but **the meaning we give them is self-determining.***

Ichiro Kishimi, 'The Courage to be Disliked'



The ethical dead end

The problem gets even darker when we look at how we treat others.

Let us pause for a moment to reflect on the reality of the criminal justice system. Research on death row inmates has revealed that a high proportion of these individuals had issues with their prefrontal cortexes—the part of the brain responsible for emotional control and resisting urges.

From a strict Determinist view, we may look at these men and say: “It’s NOT their fault. Their brain is broken. They are like a car with cut brakes.”

There is, indeed, a deep compassion in this view, and it drives important discussions about rehabilitation over punishment. However, if we take it to the extreme, we run into a “Broken Machine” problem.

If we treat everyone as broken machines, we lose the concept of *Justice*. There’s the risk of justifying heinous acts because “the universe made me do it”.

Worse, we strip humans of their *dignity*. To treat a person as a set of biological causes is to treat them as an **object**, not a **subject**.

We might save them from being blamed, but we also rob them of their *humanity*.

The pragmatic reality check

So we are trapped, right? We can’t scientifically prove we have

2.2. THE RISKS OF TOTAL DETERMINISM

free will, yet we can't ethically live without it either.

This brings us to what Christian List, a Professor of Philosophy at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU), refers to as the “**Category Mistake.**”

In a thoughtful analysis of the topic of free will, List compared explaining human choices via physics to **trying to analyze the stock market by looking at the electrons in a computer screen.**

Technically, the stock market is just electrons moving around. But if you try to explain a market crash using particle physics, you will fail. Because you are looking at the wrong “level of description”.

To understand the market, you need concepts like “value,” “fear,” and “trade.”

The same applies to us. **You CANNOT explain human life using only atoms.**

Just do a real world test. The

next time you forget your spouse's birthday, try telling them, “Honey, it wasn't me. The Big Bang set off a chain of events 13.8 billion years ago that necessitated this moment. I had no choice.”

See how that goes over.

The truth is, **agency is indispensable.** We need concepts like consent, contracts, apologies, and promises *to make society function.*

Even if physics says we are robots, **we must live as agents.**



TREADING A “MIDDLE PATH”



Freedom and destiny are solemnly promised to one another and linked together in meaning.

Martin Buber

3.1. FREEDOM WITHIN CONSTRAINTS

So here we are, stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Path A (**Total Freedom**) leads to anxiety and the arrogance of the Judge. Path B (**Total Determinism**) leads to apathy and moral collapse.

Is there a third option?

Is it possible to accept the “hand we were dealt” while still taking full responsibility for “playing the cards”?

I believe there is. In fact, it is an idea found in both Western Compatibilism and Eastern philosophy—a way of finding freedom not from our constraints, but **WITHIN** them.

(Note: For those who are not familiar with it, Compatibilism is the philosophical view that free will and determinism are not mutually exclusive—they can both be true.)

Relative Free Will

I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just float-

ing around accidental-like on a breeze, but I, I think maybe it's both. Maybe both is happening at the same time.

Forrest Gump (1994)

If you are feeling exhausted by the tug-of-war between “I am a Robot” and “I am a God,” I have a suggestion: **put down the rope.**

Much of our frustration with the topic of free will comes from the fact that we are *chasing a fantasy.*

We want **Absolute Free Will**. We want to be the “Ultimate Originator”—a being who can act completely independent of biology, history, or physics.

But that kind of freedom is a ghost. It doesn't exist.

Instead, I would like to offer you a different kind of freedom. A freedom that is smaller, perhaps, but infinitely more real. Let's call it **Relative Free Will**.

Think of it this way: “Freedom” is

3.1. FREEDOM WITHIN CONSTRAINTS

not the ability to flap your arms and fly to the moon. That would be breaking the laws of physics.

Rather, it is the ability to **walk wherever you want WITHIN the laws of gravity.**

Most of our discussions should not be about whether we can break the laws of the universe, but about **how we navigate the space we are actually given**—our “Relative Free Will” within our circumstances.

*No matter how much you want to be Y, **you cannot be reborn as him.** You are not Y. **It's okay for you to be you.** However, I am not saying it's fine to be 'just as you are'. If you are unable to really feel happy, then it's clear that things aren't right just as they are. You've got to put one foot in front of the other, and not stop.*

*To quote Adler again: '**The important thing is not what one is born with, but what use one makes of that equipment.**' You want to be Y or someone else*

*because you are utterly focused on what you were born with. Instead, you've got to focus on **what you can make of your equipment.***

Ichiro Kishimi, 'The Courage to be Disliked'

The Poker game example

To make the idea concrete, let us look at life through the lens of a card game. This is the core of the Compatibilist view—the idea that **determinism and free will can sit at the same table.**

- **The Deal is Determinism**
You did not choose your hand. You didn't pick your parents, your genetic predisposition to anxiety, the century you were born in, or the trauma you suffered as a child. That part of your life is “determined.” It is the “System” dealing cards based on physics, biology, and history.

- **The Play is Free Will**
But here's the crucial part: You have total freedom in *how you play that hand.* You can fold,

3.1. FREEDOM WITHIN CONSTRAINTS

bluff, or go all in. The cards are fixed, but the strategy is *yours*.

Freedom doesn't mean "doing anything you want." It means having the power to *choose your attitude & next action within the boundaries of your current situation*.

In this sense, your free will acts as the "Input Device" for the universe. Your past created your present, but **your current choice creates your future reality**.



Controlling the "Internal"

Man can DO what he wills, but he cannot WILL what he wills.

Arthur Schopenhauer

It sounds like a riddle, right? However, if you look at it closely, you should see Schopenhau-

er's observation is actually a practical guide.

It means you can choose to eat a sandwich (action), but you cannot choose whether or not you are hungry (desire).

Your desires are thrust upon you by biology. Your freedom lies in ***whether*** you act on them.

This is the heart of philosophies like Stoicism.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus taught people to practice the "Dichotomy of Control." According to him, we need to draw a hard line between what is up to us (our opinions, pursuits, desires, aversions) and what is not (our body, property, reputation).

One great example for this came from the story of Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who survived the terror of the Holocaust. In the concentration camp, he observed that the Nazis could take away one's identity, family, and physical freedom. However, they could not take away "the last of

3.1. FREEDOM WITHIN CONSTRAINTS

the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances”.

Even in a setting of total physical determinism, Frankl—along with many inmates—was still able to find a space for agency.

*In the concentration camps, we watched some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized **depends on decisions** but not on conditions.*

Viktor Frankl



The necessity of constraints

You must, therefore you can. A free will and a will subject to

moral laws are one and the same thing.

Immanuel Kant

Many of us assume that limitations are the enemy of freedom. However, the truth is, without boundaries, the idea of freedom would become *meaningless*.

Imagine you could do anything. Imagine a world with no gravity, no history, no consequences, no biological drives. Your choices would be weightless & random.

True freedom isn’t the absence of limitations. It is the ability to **navigate and make choices within a given framework**.

It is the creativity of the poet working within the strict rules of a sonnet, or the jazz musician improvising within a chord progression. **The constraint is what makes the art beautiful.**

Realizing this is only the first step. To be truly free requires a great deal of “inner workings” to break through one’s horizons.

3.2. ADOPTING THE “RIGHT VIEW”

A flower, like everything else, is made entirely of **non-flower elements**. The whole cosmos has come together in order to help the flower manifest herself.

Thich Nhat Hanh

If the discussion so far feels heavy to you, there is a reason. Western philosophy, for all its brilliance, tends to feel like a weightlifting competition.

The Western Existentialist is like a sculptor trying to hammer meaning out of a hard, indifferent rock.

The Stoic, on the other hand, is like a soldier standing guard at his post.

Both assume that life is a battle between a separate “Little Man” (the Ego) and a chaotic Universe.

But what if the “Little Man” doesn’t exist?

What if the wave stopped trying to separate itself from the ocean?

If Western thought asks, “How

do I force my will on the world?”, Eastern thought asks a much different question:

“Who is the ‘I’ that is willing?”

The Ego problem

Remember the “Tiny Man” fallacy we discussed earlier? We intuitively feel there is an “Owner of the Will” inside our heads.

But as we discovered, if you peel back the layers of biology, you don’t find a pilot; you just find the ship.

Buddhism takes this realization and turns it into a path to freedom—reflected through concepts like Anattā (No-Self) and Pratītyasamutpāda (Dependent Origination).

The logic is simple: **You are NOT a static noun; you are a verb.**

3.2. ADOPTING THE “RIGHT VIEW”

You are a process made entirely of “non-you” elements—your parents’ genes, the food you ate (which came from the earth), the culture you learned language from, and the sun warming the planet.

If you remove all of these “non-you” elements, there is no “you” left.

The idea may sound scary, but if you think about it, it actually brings about a massive relief.

If there is no separate “Controller,” there is **no one to blame** and **no one to defend**. The crushing anxiety of “*Am I good enough?*” or “*Did I make the right choice?*” dissolves into the reality of connection.

You realize that you are not an isolated entity fighting the universe; you are **the universe expressing itself as a human being**.

The “Swamp” of Being

Speaking of this tension between the Western desire to con-

quer and the Eastern reality of “being”, I cannot help but recall a haunting scene from Martin Scorsese’s masterpiece *Silence* (which was adapted based on Shusaku Endo’s novel) – when the apostate priest Ferreira tells the protagonist, Father Rodrigues, of an ancient proverb:

“Mountains and rivers can be moved, but man’s nature cannot.”



On the surface, it sounds like a cynical excuse for his betrayal. (i.e. renouncing the Christian faith) But deeper down, Ferreira is arguing against the Western myth of the “Plastic Soul”—the idea that we can *be whoever we want, regardless of our context*. He describes Japan (and by extension, the human condition) as a “mudswamp.” One can plant a seed of an idea or faith in it, but the swamp doesn’t change; it eventually **transforms the seed**.

3.2. ADOPTING THE “RIGHT VIEW”

In other words, we do not float above the world as disembodied spirits; we are “thrown” into a specific time, body, and culture. **We are the swamp.**

Our core—our fears, survival instincts, cultural roots—is a bed-rock that no amount of logic or inspiration can truly shift.

To believe we can simply “will” ourselves out of our nature is not freedom—it is a *delusion*.

True freedom, therefore, starts not by fighting the swamp, but by **acknowledging we are made of it.**

*As thrown, Dasein has indeed been delivered over to itself and to its potentiality-for-Being, but as **Being-in-the-world**. As thrown, it has been submitted to a ‘world’, and exists factically with Others.*

Martin Heidegger

The art of effortless action

So, if we aren’t separate, how do

we make choices? Do we just give up?

No. **We learn to swim.**

In Taoism, this principle is called Wu Wei (無為), often translated as “Non-doing” or “Effortless Action”. However, don’t mistake it for laziness.

- The Existentialist tries to *swim upstream*, fighting the current with willpower.
- The Determinist *floats like a dead log*, letting the current take them into the rocks.
- The Taoist *swims with the current*, using the water’s own power to navigate.

Let’s think of a tree. A tree does not have an existential crisis about whether to grow. It does not look at the other trees and ask, “Am I growing correctly?”

It simply follows its Te (德, *inner nature*) without resistance. It acts with perfect purpose, yet it never “struggles.”

This is the core of Eastern agen-

3.2. ADOPTING THE “RIGHT VIEW”

cy. You don’t force things to happen; you *align yourself* with the flow of reality so that **right action** happens through you.

*Man is not the lord of beings.
Man is the **Shepherd of Being**.
Man loses nothing in this “less”;
rather, he gains in that he attains the truth of Being. He gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists in **being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being’s truth**.*

Martin Heidegger



My freedom is tied to yours

Ubuntu: I am because you are.

African Philosophy

If we can adopt such a shift in

perspective, there will be a radical change in how we view our responsibility to others. Specifically, we realize that **nobody exists in a vacuum**. (no man is an island)

To quote the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, “to be is to inter-be”.

When we understand this, the concept of “Free Will” stops being a selfish obsession.

Why? Because **our actions ripple outwards**, creating consequences that impact the entire web of life.

If I choose to scream in traffic, I am not just venting “my” anger; I am *putting anger into the system*, which travels to the other driver, then to their family, and so on.

If I choose compassion, I am healing a part of the whole.

The “Void” or “Emptiness” spoken of by mystics—East and West alike—isn’t a nihilistic black hole where nothing matters. It is a *fullness*.

3.2. ADOPTING THE “RIGHT VIEW”

It is the realization that because we are empty of a separate self, we are **full of the universe**.

*When we stand before the mountain or flower and visualize just before we touch the earth the second time, we see that we are not only bodhisattvas but we are also the victims of oppression, discrimination and injustice. With the energy of the bodhisattvas we embrace victims everywhere. **We are the pirate about to rape the young girl and we are the young girl who is about to be raped.** Because we have no separate selves, **we are all interconnected** and we are with all of them.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

Free will is a “pathless land”

Truth is a pathless land.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

Here is where East meets West. From the West, we take the responsibility of Karma—the undeniable fact that our actions DO

have consequences.

From the East, we take the wisdom of *dropping the rigid Ego*—the attachment to being “right” or “in control.”

The result is a new way of living. Instead of “daring to be wrong” just to prove we exist, we now act with what the Taoists call Ziran. (自然, i.e. “spontaneity”)

We do the right thing NOT because a commandment told us to—nor because we are afraid of the abyss—but because it is **the most natural thing to do in that moment**.

*The call comes as the throw from which the thrownness of Da-sein derives. In his essential unfolding within the history of Being, man is the being whose Being as ek-sistence consists in his dwelling in the nearness of Being. **Man is the neighbor of Being.***

Martin Heidegger

THE "HOW-TO" OF AGENCY



**Freedom is pure observation
without direction, without fear
of punishment and reward.**

Jiddu Krishnamurti

4.1. 3 CORE PILLARS OF FREE WILL

By now, we have accepted that we are not gods who can control the universe. That we are part of a vast, interconnected web of biology and history. That we need to stop fighting the ocean and start “surfing” instead.

But how do you actually “surf”?

When your boss screams at you, or your spouse makes that sarcastic comment that hits your insecurity, philosophy goes out the window. Your heart races, your stomach tightens, and before you know it, you have snapped back. The “robot” has taken over.

How do we interrupt it then?

1. Mindfulness

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.

Viktor Frankl

I believe this is one of the most

practical definitions of free will. It's not about controlling the stimulus—you cannot stop the boss from yelling or the traffic from jamming.

Free will is entirely about *widening the “space” before you react.*



How? The answer lies in practicing **mindfulness**.

Free will is only possible when we are mindful. Otherwise, we are driven by sense desires and impulses—which effectively operate as biological machines.

It is only when we are mindful that we can *choose* to assent to an impulse or dissent from it.

Here is a three-step guide to “hacking” your own programming.

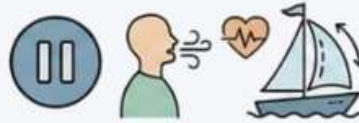
4.1.3 CORE PILLARS OF FREE WILL

MINDFULNESS: THE PATH TO FREE WILL

STEP 1: BE AWARE OF TRIGGERS



STEP 2: PAUSE



Indirect Control: Adjust the sails (breath), don't control the wind (impulses).

AIWATT QUESTION
Am I **WILLING**, at this **TIME**, to make a positive difference?

STEP 3: CHOOSE YOUR BATTLE



Step 1: Be aware of the triggers

First, we have to admit a humbling truth: **We are “superior planners” but “inferior doers”**.

We plan to be patient and kind when we are sitting calmly on the sofa. Yet most of us fail to execute that plan when we are tired, hungry, or stressed.

Why? Because, as pointed out by executive coach Marshall Goldsmith in his book *Triggers*, our environment acts as a “triggering mechanism” that **constantly reshapes us**.

Remember the “Tiny Man” falla-

cy? You don't have a tiny pilot in your head fighting the world. You have an organism reacting to an environment.

If you do not create and control your environment, **it creates and controls you**.

To practice free will, you must identify your “Hostile Environments.” Is it the phone next to your bed that triggers an hour of doomscrolling before you even wake up? Is it the smell of the bakery that overrides your diet? Is it the specific tone of voice your partner uses?

Awareness is the prerequisite for

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choice. You cannot surf a wave you don't see coming.

Step 2: Pause

Here's the thing. Seeing the trigger is not enough on its own. As discussed, you don't have direct control over your impulses or bodily functions. You can't command your heart to stop racing—nor yourself not to desire a donut.

However, you DO have **indirect control**.

Think of it like piloting a boat. You can't control the wind, but you CAN adjust the sails.

You cannot command your heart to slow down, but you CAN choose to breathe slowly, which biologically **forces the heart to slow down**.

When anger rises, don't try to suppress it—that's impossible. Instead, grab the indirect lever: **your breath**.

In that pause, ask yourself:

“Am I willing, at this time, to make the investment required to make a positive difference on this topic?”

- Am I willing? (**Do I have the energy?**)
- At this time? (**Is this the right moment?**)
- To make a positive difference? (**Will arguing help?**)

If the answer is “No,” then **say nothing**. Walk away.

By simply asking the question, you have engaged your prefrontal cortex and broken the deterministic chain of “Stimulus -> Reaction.”

Trivia: There is a scientific term for this phenomenon: **Neuroplasticity**. While the determinists are right that your brain controls you, they often forget that you **can change your brain**. Every time you pause, every time you choose silence over shouting, you are physically strengthening new neural pathways.

*In light of this, you are not just ‘acting’ free; you are **rewiring the machine to support your freedom**.*

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Step 3: Choose your “battle”

Once you have paused, it's time to decide what to actually do (aka, to “choose your battle”). Overall, our decisions can be categorized into a “Wheel of Change” as follows:

- **Create:** What new positive behaviors do I need to start? (e.g., “*I will start writing every morning*”)
- **Preserve:** What works well that I need to keep? (e.g., “*I will stay kind to my children*”)
- **Eliminate:** What bad habits must go? (e.g., “*I will stop checking emails at dinner*”)
- **Accept:** What must I make peace with? (e.g., “*I accept that my boss is difficult and will not change*”)

Often, the highest form of free will isn't fighting reality (Create/Eliminate); it is **choosing to embrace it** (Accept).

It is looking at the traffic jam, taking a deep breath, and saying, “I choose to be here, because I am here.”

2. The courage to be authentic

If practicing mindfulness gives us the “Space,” the next question is: **What do we put in it?**

This brings us back to the haunting “dizziness” we talked about previously. As discussed, while total freedom is heavy, it is also **the only thing that makes love, goodness, and joy possible.**

Authenticity is the flip side of the free will coin. If we are not fully determined by a biological or social script, then we are free—and obligated—to write our own lines.

◆ *The “mask” of bad faith*

Most of us, however, are terrified of writing our own lines. It is, indeed, much safer to read off a teleprompter.

Jean-Paul Sartre called this *Bad Faith*—lying to ourselves to avoid the burden of choice. We say things like, “I have to go to this party,” or “I have to keep this job because of the stability”.

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But as Sartre pointed out, **that is never strictly true**. You do not have to do anything. You are *choosing* to value stability over adventure, or social peace over honesty.

When we say “I have no choice,” we are putting on a social mask to feel safe. We play the role of the “Good Employee”/ the “Nice Neighbor” so we don’t have to face the risk of **being a person**.

Free will is the tool that allows us to strip away this fluff—the deception and the rituals—and *become who we actually are*.

◆ *Being “wrong” for the “right” reasons*

How do we break the script? I believe we can by looking to Kierkegaard, who described life as being comprised of 3 stages:

- **The Aesthetic Stage:** Driven by *pleasure, novelty, and sensory gratification*. The aesthete avoids commitment to escape boredom, yet his pursuit of the “moment” eventu-

- ally leads to the despair of a meaningless, fragmented existence.
- **The Ethical Stage:** Reached by choosing *responsibility* and *universal moral laws*. The individual finds purpose through duty, citizenship, and consistent social roles. However, reason and social norms alone cannot resolve the conflict between our finite nature and our “longing for the Infinite.”
- **The Religious Stage:** Defined by a *direct, singular relationship with the Absolute*. It requires a leap beyond reason into “the Absurd.” Here, one transcends universal ethics to *follow the Divine’s command*, achieving *true authenticity* and overcoming despair through *infinite passion*.



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Most of us live in the Ethical Stage, where we follow the “Universal Rules”—what society says is good, successful, and proper. While it is safe (and grants us reputation), it also leads to despair because you realize you are just a **carbon copy of everyone else**.

To become an individual, you have to **leap into a Subjective Truth**—a truth that is right for you, even if you cannot prove it to the “System”.

Speaking of which, I remember a time in my own career when I faced the exact same situation.

Back in the day, I created a local website for a company I worked for. I did it entirely on my own, without informing the headquarter’s team.

From the perspective of the “System” (the corporate structure), my decision seemed like an act of defiance. A “wrong” choice.

But I wasn’t doing it to be a rebel or to prove my point. **I was acting out of honesty.**

I truly believed that what I was doing helped address the real needs of the people we served—needs that the “System” was ignoring.

I had to choose between being a “Good Employee” (following the rules) and being an “Authentic Person” (following the truth).

And I chose the truth.

Now looking back, I cannot help but realize that quite often, authenticity looks like “being wrong” to the outside world. (though I have to admit if I could do it again, I would try to be more *skillful* in my approach)

*At the point where the road swings off, objective knowledge is suspended. Objectively he then has only uncertainty, but this is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of **choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite.***

Søren Kierkegaard

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◆ *The choice to rise above circumstances*

Authenticity isn't always about grand gestures or career risks. (like my decision to build the local website—or to quit the corporate world 2 years ago) Sometimes, it happens in the corners of our personal lives.

For example, I recently found myself visiting my sister—who was navigating the demanding reality of caring for a newborn while juggling housework and a high-pressure job.

The immense stress took its toll. Many times, she would burst in to anger or frustration, saying things that seemed, in the moment, quite irrational and unfair.

In those heated moments, I found myself at a crossroads.

The “determined” reaction—the logical, Tit-for-Tat response—would have been to get angry back. To defend my ego. To point out that she was being unreasonable.

But then there was the “Authentic” choice. I realized I could **choose to remain calm**. I could choose to offer a silent, supportive presence, even though it felt unfair to be the “punching bag”.

While the first choice (anger) felt justified, I knew it would only escalate the conflict. On the other hand, the second one (silence) preserved our relationship and gave her space to decompress.

That silence was my “Rock.” (to quote Camus) I chose to respond with compassion rather than hatred. To **embrace the absurdity of loving someone when they are being unlovable**.

In that moment, I was claiming back my own sense of agency. I was **choosing to be a decent human being**, regardless of the circumstances.

In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me,

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there's **something stronger – something better, pushing right back.**

Albert Camus



◆ The cost of courage

The opposite of courage in our society is not cowardice, it is **conformity.**

Rollo May

Let's be clear: **It's extremely hard to be authentic.**

To build the website knowing you may face the “wrath” of the headquarter later, to stay silent when you want to scream—that requires a great deal of courage.

However, remember this: authenticity is NOT about the Ego.

(“Look at how special I am!”) It is about **Responsibility.**

Sartre once talked about his philosophy of bad faith by describing a waiter who plays the role of a waiter a little too perfectly—his movements are too precise, too eager. He is acting like a waiter because he is **afraid to just be a man.**

When you act authentically—whether it's breaking a corporate rule for a reason you believe in, or swallowing your pride for your sister—you aren't performing. You aren't playing a role.

You are **responding to reality as it is**, without the mask.

3. Compassion

We have spent a lot of time talking about *your* mind, *your* choices, and *your* authenticity. That said, unless you live on a deserted island, you are going to bump into other people.

And other people—with their confusing choices, frustrating

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habits, and occasional cruelty—are often the hardest part of the free will puzzle.

This brings us to a grim question: **Does your belief about free will make you a Judge, or does it make you a Sage?**

◆ *The Judge, the Cynic & the Sage*

The debate about personal agency, as I found out, tends to reveal more about **our egos** than the truth of the universe.

If we cling too tightly to Absolute Free Will, we risk becoming **the Arrogant Judge**. We look at the poor, the addicted, or the struggling and say, “*You chose this.*” We become blind to the “hand of cards” they were dealt—their trauma, poverty, biology, etc. We lack empathy because **we assume everyone has the same strength we do.**

On the other hand, if we cling too tightly to Absolute Determinism, we risk becoming **the Cold Cynic**. We look at human struggle and see only “biological

errors” or “chemical reactions”. We analyze people like lab rats, stripping them of their mystery and dignity.

The wisest choice is to walk the Middle Way—the path of **the Sage**. The Sage understands the paradox: People feel free, but they are also heavily conditioned by forces they did not choose. As such, he uses this knowledge **to forgive**, not to condemn.

◆ *The strategy of Asymmetry*

The fault of others is easily perceived, but that of oneself is difficult to perceive; a man winnows the faults of others like chaff, but his own fault he conceals, as a cheat conceals an unlucky throw of the die.

Dhammapada, Verse 252

How do we practice this Middle Way in real life?

It’s tricky, but I believe it’s still possible if we adopt a **strategy of Asymmetry**—i.e. a pragmatic “Double Standard” for living:

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- **Treat Yourself as a Free Agent (Libertarianism):** When you make a mistake, own it. Do not hide behind “My brain made me do it.” You have access to your own “Space” (mindfulness), so you are responsible for using it.
- **Treat Others as Determined (Determinism):** When someone else hurts you, assume they are acting under the weight of their history, trauma, and biology. You cannot see their “Space,” so you *must have compassion* for their “Conditions”.

This approach maximizes your own growth (Self-Responsibility) without compromising social harmony (Compassion).

How we live our life affects everything. So we must think, How have we lived our life so that that young man... has become a rapist? ... The family into which [he] was born has been stuck in miserable poverty for many generations. ... At 13 years old he had to accompany

his father on the boat... He had no resources of understanding and love.

*If we had a gun we could shoot that young man... but **would it not have been better to help him to understand and to love?***

Last night on the shores of Thailand hundreds of babies were born... If those children are not properly cared for... some will become pirates.

*Whose fault is that? **It is OUR fault.**... We cannot blame only that young man.*

If I had been born a poor child who was never educated... I could have become a pirate...

***All the suffering of living beings is our own suffering.** We have to see that we are they and they are us. When we see their suffering, an arrow of compassion and love enters our hearts.*

Thich Nhat Hanh



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◆ *Be aware of your own ego*

In his book *What got you here won't get you there*, Dr. Goldsmith shares a story about his retreat in Plum Village as follows:

Our guide was the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. Each day Thich Nhat Hanh encouraged us to meditate on a variety of topics.

*One day the topic was **anger**. He asked us to think of a time in our lives when we had become angry and lost control. Then he asked us to analyze who was responsible for our unattractive behavior.*

I thought of my daughter Kelly when she was in her teens. She came home wearing a large brightly colored article of jewelry called a navel ring. These are common among the younger set, along with tattoos in hard-to-reach places of the human anatomy. There is no use having a navel ring if people can't see it! So Kelly had also acquired a heroically skimpy outfit designed to highlight the navel ring. (and nearly everything else

about her abdomen)

*A navel ring on a daughter is one of those moments that truly tests a father's tolerance and love. But for me it was a little more complicated, I guess. I reacted with something less than enthusiasm. In fact, **I devolved into a raving, ranting caricature of an angry father.***

*As I meditated in the quiet confines of the monastery, I wondered, **"What was I thinking about?"***

I realized my first thought was that someone would see my daughter and think, "What a cheap-looking, trashy kid! Who are her parents?"

My second thought was worse. What if one of my friends saw her and thought, "I can't believe Marshall allows his kid to parade around town like that."

*Who was I concerned about in this case? Kelly or me? **Was the bigger problem her navel ring or my ego?***

If I had to do it over again, I would still suggest she lose the navel ring. However, I would stop reacting

4.1. 3 CORE PILLARS OF FREE WILL

with anger and making a fool out of myself.

From a Deterministic view, Goldsmith's anger wasn't a "choice"—it was a conditioned response driven by social status anxiety and paternal instinct. Most parents would be stuck here, blaming the child. (*"You're rebellious!"*)

But as he later realized, the bigger problem wasn't his daughter's navel ring; **it was his ego.**

This is where the power of the Asymmetrical view comes in. You treat yourself responsible for your own ego, while understanding that your loved one is just being driven by the environment they live in.

◆ **Deconstructing "Evil"**

While doing my own research on the topic of free will, I came across a Reddit thread in which there is a philosophical argument that goes like this:

"I don't care if someone murders a child, it's not their fault; something

*is wrong in their brain to do that and if we don't want innocent people to get hurt **we need to solve the root problem** instead of reacting angrily at "criminals"/ those who deviate from or who struggle to do prosocial behaviors."*

This is difficult to swallow. But I believe that **compassion does not necessarily mean approval.**

We don't have to agree with the crime to understand the criminal.

A criminal, after all, is not an isolated "monster" acting in a vacuum; they are, many times, the result of interconnected causes—poverty, abuse, brain injury, or untreated mental illness.

As the Japanese author Shusaku Endo wrote:

"There is no such thing in the world as absolute evil or absolute good. There is good to be found within evil, and plenty of evil to be found within the good."

The world is torn apart between good and evil, fate and freedom.

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It's a constant cycle that knows no end.

We must stop being the “They”—the crowd that points fingers—and focus on being the “Light”.

We change the world not by judging the darkness, but by **understanding what caused it**.



◆ *The final test*

It doesn't matter which side you are on in this debate. At the end of the day, everything boils down to one simple test.

Ask yourself: **Does your stance on Free Will make you a better person?**

If your belief in Free Will makes you arrogant, or your belief in Determinism makes you cruel,

you have failed.

To quote the Dalai Lama:

*“The best religion is one that gets you closest to God. It is the one that **makes you a better person**.*

I am not interested about your religion... What really is important to me is your behavior in front of your peers, family, work, community and in front of the world.”

If you replace “religion” with “philosophy” or “ideology”, you will see where you should be heading.

4.1. 3 CORE PILLARS OF FREE WILL

The 3 Core Pillars of Free Will



Mindfulness



Courage to be authentic



Compassion

JMP
JONATHAN M. PHAM

4.2. FREE WILL IS A “MYSTERY”

A mystery is a problem that encroaches upon its own data, that invades the data and thereby transcends itself as a simple problem.

Gabriel Marcel

By now, I suppose you should have realized (if you are honest with yourself) that trying to come up with a definitive answer to the problem of “free will” is just like the boy on the beach—**trying to pour the infinite ocean of existence into the seashell of our logic.** A futile effort.

At the end of the day, the math doesn’t settle. We are still left with the “Scientific Siege” on one side, telling us we are biological machines, and the “Existential Feeling” on the other, screaming that we are free. The paradox remains.

But perhaps we can view this lack of closure not as a failure, but a **doorway.** A “mystery.”

To quote the mystic Richard Rohr:

“Mystery is not something that

*you cannot understand, but it is something that is **endlessly understandable!**”*

A puzzle is something you solve and put away. A mystery, on the other hand, is something you *enter and live within.*

Uncertainty is a blessing

To listen to Being, we must silence the noise of certainty.

Martin Heidegger

There is a reason why films like Minority Report or the series Devs haunt us. They present a world where the future is perfectly predicted—where Determinism is a known fact. In those worlds, characters often fight desperately to break the prediction.

Why? Because if we truly knew

4.2. FREE WILL IS A “MYSTERY”

the script, we would cease to be “living”; we would just be reciting lines.

The uncertainty we fear is actually the oxygen of our existence.

If the Universe gave us clear, booming orders, we would be slaves. Its silence, therefore, is necessary for us to flourish.

It is the prerequisite for the “Leap of Faith” those like Kierkegaard talked about.

It was in the silence that I heard Your voice.

Father Rodriguez, Silence

A call to action

From here, we return to the “Middle Way” we have discussed above. Think of your life as a *Feedback Loop*.

- The Input is the world giving you **your circumstances**—your genetics, your history, your traffic jams. That is your *Karma*.

- The Output is **your conscious response**—your attitude, your kindness, your refusal to give in to hate. That is your *Dharma* (Duty).

The world may look like a broken, deterministic machine. It may be flavorless and dark. But that doesn’t mean we have to give in to despair.

We can become the “Salt” that adds the flavor of agency. The “Light” that adds the direction of meaning.

We can act as the bridge between the cold laws of physics and the warmth of human love.

We can despair of the meaning of life in general, but not of the particular forms that it takes; we can despair of existence, for we have no power over it, but not of history, where the individual can do everything.

Albert Camus

A LITTLE DOSE OF INSPIRATION



**Where I am authentically
myself, I am certain that I am
not through myself.**

Karl Jaspers

5.1. THE THREE QUESTIONS



A short story by Leo Tolstoy

One day, a king determined that he would be able to cope with any occurrence if he had the answers to three critical questions:

- 1. What is the best time to begin everything?*
- 2. Who are the best people to listen to?*
- 3. What is the most important thing to do?*

Many educated men attempted to answer the king's questions, but they all came up with different answers. The king decided that he needed to ask a wise hermit in a nearby village. The hermit would only see common folk, however, so the king disguised himself as a peasant and left his guards behind to see the hermit.

The hermit was digging flower beds when the king arrived. The king asked his questions, but the hermit went on digging rather laboriously. The king offered to dig for him for a while. After digging for some time, the king again asked his questions.

Before the hermit could answer, a man emerged from the woods. He was bleeding from a terrible stomach wound. The king tended to him, and they stayed the night in the hermit's hut. By the next day, the wounded man was doing better but was incredulous at the help he

5.1. THE THREE QUESTIONS

had received.

The man confessed that he knew who the king was, and that the king had executed his brother and seized his property. He had come to kill the king, but the guards wounded him in the stomach. The man pledged allegiance to the king, asked for forgiveness and went on his way.

The king asked the hermit again for his answers, and the hermit responded that he had just had his questions answered:

1. *The most important time is **NOW**.*
2. *The most important person is **whoever you are with**.*
3. *The most important thing is to **help the person you are with**.*

COMMENTS

Like the King, we often exhaust ourselves trying to hack the code of our own lives. We obsess over the future, paralyzed by the need to find the "perfect" time to act or the "perfect" path to take. We want to control the narrative (Determinism) before it even unfolds.

But the only time we actually possess is **NOW**. While we are busy analyzing the big picture, the real work of living is waiting for us in the form of a bleeding man or a laboring hermit.

To be truly free is to stop wasting your energy worrying about a future you cannot touch - and instead focusing on *how you respond to the present moment*.

5.2. SONG OF HOPE



Saturn – by Sleeping At Last

Image source: YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzNvk80XY9s>

*You taught me the courage of stars before you left
How light carries on endlessly even after death
With shortness of breath you explained the infinite
How rare and beautiful it is to even exist.*

*I couldn't help but ask
For you to say it all again
I tried to write it down
But I could never find a pen
I'd give anything to hear
You say it one more time
That the universe was made
Just to be seen by my eyes
I couldn't help but ask
For you to say it all again
I tried to write it down
But I could never find a pen
I'd give anything to hear
You say it one more time*

5.2. SONG OF HOPE

*That the universe was made
Just to be seen by my eyes*

*With shortness of breath, I'll explain the infinite
How rare and beautiful it truly is that we exist.*

COMMENTS

In a universe largely made of dead rocks and cold space, the fact that you are *here*—conscious, breathing, and able to feel—is a statistical miracle.

If we accept that our existence is this fragile and "rare," there would be a radical change in how we view our purpose. Specifically, we don't need to conquer the world to justify our place in it.

As the lyrics suggest, **we are enough simply because we are here to witness it.** The universe was made to be seen by your eyes.

5.3. FURTHER READINGS



Nihilism vs Existentialism vs Absurdism: A Journey Into the Abyss

<https://jonathanmpham.com/en/philosophy-and-spirituality/nihilism-vs-existentialism-vs-absurdism/>



How to Take a Leap of Faith: Trusting Intuition Over Logic

<https://jonathanmpham.com/en/the-self/take-a-leap-of-faith/>



How to Deal with Existential Dread: A Seeker's Guide to Finding Light

<https://jonathanmpham.com/en/philosophy-and-spirituality/how-to-deal-with-existential-dread/>



Living in Bad Faith: The Existentialist Guide to Stopping Self-Deception

<https://jonathanmpham.com/en/the-self/living-in-bad-faith-existentialism/>



Are You Living or Just Existing?

<https://jonathanmpham.com/en/the-self/are-you-living-or-just-existing/>

More articles can be found here:

<https://jonathanmpham.com/en/philosophy-and-spirituality/>

<https://jonathanmpham.com/en/the-self/>

EMBARKING ON THE JOURNEY

So here we are: the end! Or should I say, **the beginning**.

It's time for us to put the reflections so far into real life. To adopt the stance of Socrates: regarding the metaphysics of the universe, "*I don't know for sure*". But regarding one's own life, "*I know what I must do.*"

Close your laptop. Put down your phone. Look at those around you.

You did not choose them, and you did not choose the person you were when you woke up this morning.

But you are **here now**. The cards have been dealt.

Play them beautifully.

Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one.

Marcus Aurelius

Until next time,

Jonathan M. Pham



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<https://jonathanmpham.com/en/newsletter-sign-up/>



**There are two ways of spreading light: to be
the candle or the mirror that reflects it.**

Edith Warton