

Lesson 2: Human agency and free will: Blessing or curse?

How Free Are You?

Do you have the freedom to create your own future or is your life determined by forces beyond your control?

This issue has been debated by philosophers, theologians, and psychologists. How you resolve this issue has important implications for how you live your life.

"You say: I am not free. But I have raised and lowered my arm. Everyone understands that this illogical answer is an irrefutable proof of freedom."

— Leo Tolstoy (War and Peace)

Viktor Frankl's 3 Basic Tenets of Logotherapy

1. Freedom of choice
2. Will to meaning
3. Meaning of life

"Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

— Viktor Frankl

B. F. Skinner's Determinism

Skinner wrote the controversial book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* in 1971. He makes the following points:

1. Freedom is an illusion.
2. Behavior is determined by genetics and the environment.
3. There is no such thing as the "autonomous person."
4. Scientific analysis can reveal the controlling relationships between behavior and the environment.

Types of Determinism

Our behavior is often determined by various factors without our awareness.

1. Environmental
2. Genetics
3. Unconsciousness
4. Cause and Effect
5. Karma
6. Physical Laws
7. Spiritual Laws
8. Fate or Predestination

The Human Yearning for Freedom and Liberty

1. The French revolution
2. The American experiment
3. The Inspiration of the Statue of Liberty
4. The worldwide democratic movement

Escape from Freedom

“...Freedom has a twofold meaning for modern man: that he has been freed from traditional authorities and has become an ‘individual,’ but that at the same time he has become isolated, powerless and an instrument of purposes outside of himself, alienated from himself and others; furthermore, that this state undermines his self, weakens and frightens him, and makes him ready for submission to new kinds of bondage. Positive freedom on the other hand is identical with the full realization of the individual’s potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously.”

— Eric Fromm

Limits of Freedom and Democracy

1. What do you choose between: Being free and alone and belonging to an authoritarian group?
2. Is freedom and democracy an illusion?
3. Is democracy the ideal social political system?

The Story of Adam and Eve

1. A story of rebellion against authoritarian control.
2. A story of human finiteness and limitation.
3. Is free will a gift or a curse?
4. How do you balance free will with determinism?

The Implications of Free Will

1. The autonomous person and responsibility.
2. Moral agency and personal accountability.
3. Executive agency and self-efficacy.
4. Am I “the master of my fate and the captain of my soul”?

Personal Responsibility for a Better Life

1. The appeal of Oprah Winfrey.
2. You have the control and power to make your life better.
3. Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy.
4. Your choice determines your destiny – life is what you make of it.

5. We are responsible to our neighbours and environment.

"For you will certainly carry out God's purpose, however you act, but it makes a difference to you whether you serve like Judas or like John."

— C.S. Lewis (The Problem of Pain)