
Free Will and Illusion

SAUL SMILANSKY

CLARENDON PRESS • OXFORD

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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ISBN 0-19-825018-5

To the memory of my father, and to my mother

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there.

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*)

This book has not only been an intimate part of my life for more than ten years, but has intricate connections with who I am. Hence, it is almost impossible to estimate all that it owes to others on a personal level. Even when limiting my thoughts to the writing of my thesis and its long transformation into this book, I am acutely aware of the scale of my indebtedness to others.

The ancient origins of this book lie with my Oxford D.Phil thesis (1990). Richard Swinburne, my first supervisor, made every effort to help me get the work under way, and was reassuring despite our disagreement over libertarian free will. Galen Strawson was my supervisor during most of my studies, and, besides contributing to the formation of my ideas, taught me to write philosophy in English, and has been supportive of my project up to the publication stage. My examiners, Sir Peter Strawson and Derek Parfit, offered many helpful comments as well as encouragement.

A number of people were most wonderful, and heroically read drafts of it all. I am exceptionally grateful to Martha Klein, who took it upon herself to read the thesis, and gave me very thorough and significant feedback on the philosophy and the writing. My wife, Hagar Kahana-Smilansky, carefully read both thesis and manuscript, contributed to the development of my ideas, and attempted valiantly to bring clarity to the formulations. Iddo Landau perceptively and most helpfully read the manuscript and then many further instalments; Iddo has been a selfless friend for many years, consistently and warmly supportive. Jeff McMahan made many particularly important and acute suggestions for the manuscript; Jeff proved himself to be a faithful, sensitive, and most helpful friend. With Daniel Statman I have had a continuous and good-humoured exchange of ideas; his sceptical comments on the manuscript were valuable. David Wengrow worked himself and me hard on advanced drafts of the manuscript, making a huge contribution to the writing and clarity of the book. Derek Parfit read (once again!) a draft of the manuscript, providing extremely useful ideas, and sharp criticism. The three readers for Oxford University Press (one of whom was Martha Klein, the other

two anonymous) gave me invaluable help. All these people were very generous with their time and provided a very large number of suggestions. Their responses have benefited this book in so many ways that the contributions simply could not be enumerated (I do, however, note the most striking philosophical instances in the text).

I am grateful to a number of people who very kindly read large parts of the manuscript and helped to improve it: Daniel Attas, Nir Eyal, Edward Harcourt, Daniel Kofman, Hugh LaFollette, Jimmy Lenman, Kevin Magill, and Paul Russell. I have benefited from the opportunity to go over a draft of this book with my graduate seminar at the University of Haifa on 'Freedom and Moral Responsibility' in the winter of 1996, and learned particularly from Guy Pinku.

The following kindly read and commented upon portions of this work, at the thesis or manuscript stages: Michael Anthony, Joseph Berkovitz, Harvey Chisick, Randolph Clarke, Jerry Cohen, Avner de-Shalit, Josh Getzler, Snait Gissis, James Griffin, Giora Hon, Menachem Kellner, Nicola Lacey, Randal Marlin, Robert McKim, Adrian Moore, Andrew Moore, David Pears, Philip Percival, Joseph Raz, Andrew Williams, Nick Zangwill, and Lucy Zedner. I am grateful to them, as also to the late H. L. A. Hart for comments he made in correspondence.

Over the years, I have inflicted my free will-related views upon a large number of professional audiences in the United Kingdom, Israel, and the United States; I am grateful for the invitations and for the reactions. I cannot hope to mention all of the people who have read drafts of my papers and have, in some way, influenced this book; they have been acknowledged in the publications themselves. Following the publication of my paper 'The Ethical Advantages of Hard Determinism', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1994), which developed into section 10.1 of this book, I received many stimulating responses, particularly from Richard Double, David Heyd, Robert Kane, Tomis Kapitan, Peter Strawson, Ralph Walker, and Susan Wolf.

The process of writing this book was enriched and lightened by the love of those close to me. My parents, Moshe and Sarah Smilansky, supported my personal development and studies in many ways. I have been infused by their devotion, and they have provided me with models of initiative, creativity, and commitment. This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, and to my mother. Apart from the help of a number of good friends who were mentioned before, others have been important; some are mentioned in other capacities, they and those not mentioned know who they are. The wonderful help of my wife Hagar was all-rounded, encompassing life and work. My brother Jonathan Smilansky was there for me whenever I needed him, and gave much encouragement and wise advice.

Finally, my daughter Alma helped to put the conclusions of this book in perspective.

I am thankful to the Sub-Faculty of Philosophy in Oxford, for providing a pleasant philosophical environment and for allowing me to pursue my work in my own way. My studies at Oxford University were assisted by Overseas Research Student Awards granted by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom, during the academic years 1986/7, 1987/8, and 1988/9, and by an Avi Fellowship from the Rothschild Foundation. I appreciate this assistance, and owe special gratitude to the late Sir Isaiah Berlin for his help with regard to the latter. I am grateful to Amihud Gilead and Aaron Ben-Zeev for bringing me to the philosophy department at Haifa, and thank the Israeli Council for Higher Education for granting me the three-year Allon Fellowship which made the initial move possible. Leave of absence granted by the University of Haifa in the 1995/6 academic year allowed me to devote time to developing my ideas and rewriting the thesis into a book. A Chevening Foreign and Commonwealth Office Research Scholarship awarded by the British Council for the summer of 1997 allowed me to pursue some related concerns over the notion of desert. Finally, the finishing touches of this book were made under most pleasant conditions in Oxford, thanks to a sabbatical leave from the University of Haifa, and to the Principal and Fellows of St Hugh's College who elected me as an Associate Senior Member during 1998/9. For the latter good fortune, Josh Getzler deserves particular gratitude.

Sarah Cohen and Rami Zidon went on various research missions; Murray Rosovsky helped with the English of the manuscript in early days; Elizabeth M. Knowles, Managing Editor of OUP's Quotations Dictionaries, uncovered the hard-to-find references for two quotations. Peter Momtchiloff the philosophy editor of Oxford University Press was welcoming and most resourceful during the various stages of the long review and preparation of the book for press. Robert Ritter and Charlotte Jenkins, who oversaw the production process for OUP, and Jackie Pritchard, who did the copy-editing, were meticulous and sensitive. Marion Lupu was a great help with the proof reading.

Certain parts of this work make use of material from my own articles. Where appropriate, I have indicated this in the text. I gratefully acknowledge here the permission of the editors and publishers to make use of materials from the following articles: 'The Contrariety of Compatibilist Positions', *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 26 (1991), 293–308; 'Does the Free Will Debate Rest on a Mistake?', *Philosophical Papers*, 22 (1993), 173–88; 'The Ethical Advantages of Hard Determinism', *Philosophy and*

Phenomenological Research, 54 (1994), 355–63; ‘Responsibility and Desert: Defending the Connection’, *Mind*, 105 (1996), 157–63; ‘Can a Determinist Respect Herself?’, in C. H. Manekin and M. Kellner (eds.), *Freedom and Moral Responsibility: General and Jewish Perspectives* (College Park: University of Maryland Press, 1997), 85–98; ‘Free Will: The Positive Role of Illusion’, *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* (Boston, 1999).

S.S.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The picture of the human condition presented here is in many ways disturbing. This might be a reason for some people not to read the book—perhaps those who lack familiarity with the ways of philosophical discourse, for the young, the very sensitive, and for those who are liable to depression. I ask the prospective reader to bear this in mind.

The content of this book may also be misunderstood or abused at the social level. To my understanding there is nothing here which contradicts the social values I hold, affirming a humanistic outlook based on universal equal human rights, and a constitutional democratic regime. I request that the reader take care in understanding the complex arguments being made, and not jump to simplistic and hasty conclusions. Any attempt to enlist this book in a movement opposed to the enlightened humanistic ethos of Western civilization, or to use it in a way which opposes academic freedom, or leads to intolerance or cruelty towards men and women, lacks foundation in this work.

[P]erhaps it is the most distinctive of all the marks of rational man to have reasoned himself to a point where he falls into barbarism if he takes the notion of autonomous agency, whether mythical or not, either too seriously—or too lightly.

(David Wiggins, 'Towards a Reasonable Libertarianism')

No one with impunity gives to himself the eyes of a god.

(Czeslaw Milosz, 'To Robinson Jeffers', in *The Collected Poems*)

Introduction

[M]y present opinion is that nothing that might be a solution [to the free will problem] has yet been described.

(Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*)

This book explores the role of illusion in the free will problem, a problem at the heart of morality and human self-understanding. Understanding the role of illusion, I claim, is the key to the free will problem. Within our lives, insofar as they are affected by the issue of free will, illusion is descriptively central and normatively necessary. Beyond a specific exploration of the role of illusion, this book also attempts to crystallize insights gained by recent philosophical research into the free will problem into an integrated, coherent view. It is maintained that we have most of the resources for a general, albeit rough, understanding of the free will problem.

This is indeed only a bare outline, analogous, perhaps, to the level of geographical knowledge possessed by explorers of North America in the late 1600s. Most of the free will-related continent still needs to be mapped by intrepid philosophical explorers. And yet, there is no foundation for views that reject outright the possibility of solving the free will problem. This is so on the assumption that various philosophically sceptical views unrelated to free will can be bypassed, and in particular that moral notions in general are acceptable. Real progress has been made in our philosophical understanding of the free will problem, and the outline of a solution seems to be coming into view.

What emerges, however, is very odd, and in many ways counter-intuitive. It is also psychologically ambiguous. On the one hand, much of what we discover is highly displeasing, often with good reason. Only some of the 'phenomena' can be saved, and the price of saving them is high. Common views of freedom, justice, human worth, and related notions are radically misguided, and the absurd looms large. We do, however, possess some justification for much of the enlightened view about morality and justice, and limited grounding for some of our most cherished views of ourselves remains—although in a form that dissolves them into a wider, and darker, picture.

If we are to make serious progress towards confronting the free will problem we must first recognize that we are not, in fact, able to get what we have reason to want, either ethically or in personal terms. The understandable unwillingness to accept this and the denial of the true insights of ‘pessimistic’ positions or of the very real urgency of the problem itself is, I suggest, at the heart of the debate. The situation demands that we should be ready to change many of our *basic* assumptions, not only regarding free will, but also our very conception of justice, morality, the importance of knowledge, and the grounds for human self-respect. A central feature of my discussion involves placing in doubt common assumptions, such as the necessity to be either compatibilists or incompatibilists (the terminology will be explained shortly), the aspiration, even in principle, towards morally satisfactory justice, and the belief that deception and illusion are necessarily immoral. This work is thus radical in some ways, but that is a requirement of the case, and I try to accommodate the deep insights of rival positions rather than simply dismiss them. By now, we all should have little patience with those purporting to solve the free will problem in some simple, easy, or pleasant way.

The book has two parts. In Part I, I examine the metaphysical and ethical structure of the free will problem, examining the solutions that have traditionally been offered and formulating my own position. This lays the groundwork for examining the importance of illusion in Part II.

We begin in Chapter 2, by considering the basic intuition lying behind the free will problem. This intuition is, broadly, that people’s control over their actions is very important. At least with respect to matters such as moral responsibility, desert, and punishment, the question of control or lack of it is crucial. For example, it is manifestly *unfair* to blame a person for something in no way under her control. This unfairness cannot be fully captured by consequentialist considerations, and is based on the inherent ethical importance of control, which needs to be elucidated. I call the general idea that control is morally central in such ways the *Core Conception*. Attempts to dent or reject the Core Conception are shown to be wrong, and it is also shown that the relevant notion of ‘control’ can be complex, opening the door for disparate interpretations. We have to overcome the dogmatic *Assumption of Monism*, according to which the traditional compatibilist or incompatibilist interpretations of the requirements of the Core Conception are necessarily mutually exclusive, and only one can be ‘really’ true.

There are many forms of freedom—political liberty, the freedom of ‘finding oneself’, the sense of feeling psychologically unencumbered and a ‘free spirit’, and more—which are not directly related to the traditional philosophical free will problem. At the centre of this problem lies the

concern whether significant forms of freedom are under threat from an understanding of persons within nature (although I stress that no radical transformation of our understanding of the self or of the mental, such as physicalistic reductionism, is assumed here). It is possible to consider the free will problem without relating it to morality, but here our main concern will be with the sort of free will that is required for moral responsibility and related notions. We need to find out whether we have significant control over our actions, hence whether the Core Conception can be met, in the real world.

Having identified the Core Conception, we proceed in Chapter 3 to explore whether *compatibilism* meets it. Compatibilism is, roughly, the position that the forms of free will most people clearly have to some degree, such as the ability to deliberate and do as they wish, suffice to meet the requirements of the Core Conception. In particular, the compatibilist rejects the idea that some sort of ‘metaphysical’ or ‘libertarian’ notion of free will, such as would be negated by a completely deterministic ontology, is necessary in order to have moral responsibility. Hence, the term ‘compatibilism’: the compatibilist insists that free will, moral responsibility, and their concomitant notions are compatible with determinism (or with the absence of libertarian free will). For example, the compatibilist will say that most people in the West choose a career with some measure of freedom, and are morally responsible for this choice, although it follows from their desires and beliefs. Lack of relevant freedom would result only from atypical causes eliminating or severely curtailing control (such as pathological compulsion or external coercion). On the *compatibilist level* of deliberating, choosing, and acting most people are basically free, such matters are within their control, and it is this that matters. The compatibilist can be characterized, then, as a non-demanding optimist. There have been important advances in recent years in elucidating compatibilist free will and responsibility. I will not engage with the various formulations in detail, for my central concern in this book (in addition to the role of illusion) is the general adequacy of the compatibilist stance in contrast to hard determinism, not the exact way to view compatibilist free will in various circumstances. The conclusion of Chapter 3 is that compatibilism is *insufficient*: if we have only compatibilist forms of control or free will, we are in serious difficulty in ethical and personal terms.

Hence, we move on, in Chapter 4, to explore a more ambitious form of free will, which is commonly called ‘*libertarian*’ *free will*. In a rough sense, we are all familiar with it. At this stage it can be characterized as the ability to control one’s actions and actually do otherwise in exactly the same situation, with internal and external conditions held constant. People naturally assume that they have libertarian free will, and it has formed the basis of

most of the ethical teaching of the Western religions and of major ethical systems such as Kant's. The question whether libertarian free will is coherent will be called the Coherence Question. That the answer to it is 'no' will emerge by the end of Chapter 4. The culturally dominant, psychologically crucial, and perhaps biologically natural view, that human beings can as it were transcend what they are in choice, *cannot be sustained*. This is so irrespective of the exact status of causality and determinism, which means that the question of the truth of determinism is moot. The libertarian can be characterized as a demanding optimist, but since the demand cannot be met the optimism is misguided.

The case against libertarian free will has been well stated before, and there is nothing substantially original about my argument here. Anyone who does not believe in the existence of libertarian free will can therefore skip Chapter 4. Most of the argument of this book is addressed to those who accept that there is no libertarian free will.

The ethical and personal insufficiency of compatibilism and the ontological impossibility of libertarianism point us towards *hard determinism*, a normative position according to which moral responsibility and desert are impossible. Libertarian free will is required, but does not exist. The hard determinist is the demanding pessimist in our cast of characters: she agrees with the libertarian that compatibilist free will is insufficient and that we require libertarian free will for moral responsibility; hence, both are incompatibilists. But, like the compatibilist, the hard determinist believes that libertarian free will does not exist. Consider again the example of the person who chose his career freely according to the compatibilist: the hard determinist will want to say that on the *ultimate level* the career-choice was not up to the person, who could not in the end form the sources of his motivation. These sources, the hard determinist will emphasize, are the basis for his 'free' choice on the compatibilist level. In certain cases—such as if the man chose a criminal career—this absence of ultimate control is what matters, and eliminates moral responsibility. However, in Chapter 5 we see that a simplistic hard determinism is also *unconvincing* in terms of the Core Conception, and we have to return some distance towards compatibilism, and recover its partial, but valid, insights.

The three major traditional positions on the free will problem (compatibilism, libertarianism, and hard determinism) are seen, then, to be inadequate in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, respectively. This does not depend of course on the order in which we tackle them: we can begin not with compatibilism but with libertarian free will. Libertarian free will is impossible, for we answer the Coherence Question negatively. This makes it crucial to answer the Compatibility Question: is moral responsibility (and related matters) compatible with the absence of libertarian free will? The two historical

alternatives here—compatibilism which says ‘yes’ and hard determinism which says ‘no’—are both one-sided and simplistic. Neither is adequate.

The conclusion of Part I is that we must accept what I call the *Fundamental Dualism* residing in these issues. I agree with the hard determinists that the absence of libertarian free will is a grave matter, which ought radically to change our understanding of ourselves, of morality, and of justice. But I also agree with the compatibilists that it makes sense to speak about ideas such as moral responsibility and desert, even without libertarian free will (and without recourse to a reductionist transformation of these notions along consequentialist lines). In a nutshell, we shall see why ‘forms of life’ based on the compatibilist distinctions about control are possible and morally required, but are also superficial and deeply problematic in ethical and personal terms. I claim that the most plausible approach to the Compatibility Question is a *complex compromise*: the idea that either compatibilism or hard determinism can be adequate on its own is untenable.

In Chapter 6, we explore the Fundamental Dualism and its practical dimensions. This dualism requires that we be, in a sense, both compatibilists and hard determinists, and maintain these two contrasting perspectives simultaneously. But such a joint perspective is very difficult to work with, and I begin by exploring the possibility of combining the two perspectives. I go on to address distributive aspects of free will-related desert and justice, which, unfortunately, are usually neglected. Then I consider the role of free will and the manifestation of the Fundamental Dualism in issues of worth, as they arise from our views of ourselves and in areas of personal life not necessarily connected with morality. I conclude Chapter 6 by exploring the complexity of the emerging considerations and conclusions, going even beyond the Fundamental Dualism.

The respective strengths of the compatibilist and hard determinist perspectives vary, depending on many factors. One of the outcomes of this work is the realization of this complexity. There is no single test determining the strength of compatibilism and hard determinism, but rather a host of different questions, situations, and even choices as to how we wish to view things. Sometimes compatibilism will be salient and sometimes hard determinism, and often we will be stuck with both contrastive insights and will have to make do. The Fundamental Dualism is not merely psychological but conceptual, and will not go away. I propose various conceptual innovations to help address this complexity, but much of the required understanding is embedded in common intuitions. We need to understand better why the absence of libertarian free will has seemed of glaring importance to so many, and of no importance whatsoever to so many others, and to examine when and why either side has captured more of the truth.

Readers eager to proceed to the exploration of illusion in Part II may get a grasp of the conclusions of Part I, notably the Fundamental Dualism, by reading section 6.1

In Part II, I examine the importance of illusion. The core of my alternative conception of the free will problem beyond the Fundamental Dualism is presented in Chapter 7. Its central tenet, which we may term *Illusionism*, is that illusion often has a *large and positive role* to play in the free will issue. The importance of illusion is seen to flow from the basic structure of the free will problem. It flows indirectly, from the Fundamental Dualism of the partial and varying validity of compatibilism and hard determinism, and directly and more deeply from the meaning of the very absence of the sort of grounding that libertarian free will was thought to provide. We cannot live adequately with the two valid sides of the Fundamental Dualism, nor with a complete awareness of the absence of libertarian free will. We have to face the fact that there are basic beliefs that morally ought not to be abandoned (or morally ought to be strengthened), although they might destroy each other, or are even partially based on incoherent conceptions. At least for most people, these beliefs are potentially in need of motivated mediation and defence by illusion, ranging from wishful thinking to self-deception.

In arguing for the importance of illusion I claim that we can see why it is useful, that it is a reality, and that by and large it ought to continue. It is not claimed that we need to induce illusory beliefs concerning free will, or can live with beliefs we fully realize are illusory—both of these positions would be highly implausible. Rather, my claim is that illusory beliefs are in place, and that the role they play is largely positive. Humanity is fortunately deceived on the free will issue, and this seems to be a condition of civilized morality and personal sense of value. Illusion and ignorance appear to be conditions for social and personal success. However, the role of illusion within the free will issue is complex. Even without libertarian free will, even in a deterministic world, ‘not all is illusion’ with free will and moral responsibility. *Free Will and Illusion* is about understanding what is not illusion just as it is about understanding what is. Moreover, the relationship between that which is illusory and that which is not further complicates the role of illusion. The partial validity of compatibilism does not reduce the need for illusion so much as it complicates it and even adds to it. Chapter 8 advances our exploration into the ‘land of illusion’, and investigates themes such as depth, ignorance, and time in the context of free will.

The ensuing comprehension of the role of illusion in the free will problem helps us to confront the third central question. It follows the Coherence Question (is libertarian free will coherent?) and the Compatibility Question (is moral responsibility compatible with the

absence of libertarian free will?) and asks: how are we to deal with the answers to the previous two questions? We may refer to this third question as the Consequences Question. Our discussion also allows us to dismiss another important alternative position argued for by P. F. Strawson, in Chapter 9, 'Why Not Reactive-Naturalism', utilizing its true insights in the direction of Illusionism.

The position we arrive at, combining the respective answers to the three central questions (Coherence, Compatibility, Consequences), can be characterized, then, as 'non-libertarianism', 'Fundamental Dualism', and 'Illusionism'. Primarily, I am offering two radical proposals for understanding the free will problem once we see that libertarian free will is impossible: an inescapable dualism of both compatibilism and hard determinism, and a diagnosis of the crucial and largely positive role of illusion. This position has various implications. Chapter 10 considers the more positive ones, including a number of rather surprising benefits of the belief in hard determinism and of the crucial role of illusion in our lives. Chapter 11 deals with certain difficulties with my position and possible objections to it. These range from the difficulty about honesty to political dangers and further to the paradoxical role of philosophy and the absurdity of life. This book raises troubling questions regarding the merits and demerits of knowledge and self-honesty. Such questions are claimed to be less easy and more central than most philosophy has recognized. Chapter 12 is the conclusion, where I summarize the argument of the book, and reflect more generally on the role of illusion in our lives, in free will and beyond. The reader may benefit from reading the section-by-section survey of the argument in the conclusion before proceeding with the book.

The importance of illusion has remained largely neglected in the free will debate. There have been, nevertheless, important contributions in recent years that have helped me develop my position (by Isaiah Berlin, P. F. Strawson, Jonathan Glover, Thomas Scanlon, Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, Harry Frankfurt, Jonathan Bennett, Peter van Inwagen, Susan Wolf, Daniel Dennett, Galen Strawson, Martha Klein, Bruce Waller, Ted Honderich, Gary Watson, Richard Double, Jay Wallace, Tomis Kapitan, John Martin Fischer, Derk Pereboom, Paul Russell, Robert Kane, Kevin Magill, Ishtiyaque Haji, and Hilary Bok, among others). I have greatly benefited from them, as from others. My own view differs from these previous efforts in four main respects: first, in putting forth a firmly dualistic interpretation of the implications of the absence of libertarian free will, eschewing the hopes to avoid the confrontation or to decide for one side on the Compatibility Question. Secondly, in offering a distinct 'solution' to the free will problem, based, in addition to the Fundamental Dualism, on recognizing the positive importance of what I call 'significantly avoidable, morally

necessary, potentially motivated illusion' (the meaning of these terms will be explained later). This book also differs from most previous work in its detailed discussion of desert, justice, and worth, concentrating on the less subjective aspects of the problem. Finally, this book differs in its attempt to examine the cognitive and practical implications of the dualistic and illusionistic approach in detail. I claim that the free will issue cannot be settled on the basis of its more subjective aspects, and without a thorough analysis of the significance of the dualistic and illusionistic situation.

Any comprehensive discussion of the free will problem faces many obstacles. This problem and the basic alternative positions on it have been recognized for some 2,000 years, and the literature is immense. Moreover, the last forty years have seen a large crop of innovative work on this problem, much of it highly technical and some of it of a very high quality. Thirdly, the problem inherently combines the metaphysical and ontological with the ethical and personal. The main difficulties are, however, the natural human desires for simplification and for escaping unpleasant truths. The complexity and unpalatable nature of the discussion lead me to ask the reader for his or her patience. I have tried to learn from all major previous positions, and attempt to confront even more minor recent ideas within the constraints of space. I trust that this will be apparent. Similarly, I believe that a critical but (at least initially) charitable stance is required in order to understand my position. The canvas is broad and the drawing detailed. My answers to objections might not be seen at first but will (I hope) become clearer as one goes along. Perhaps most importantly, we must decide whether we truly wish to understand. For reasons that the discussion reveals, emotional resistance is a natural feature of the free will issue, but it is philosophically unhelpful. If we wish to be seekers after the truth, we should aim to free ourselves from illusion, but in the case of free will this is not only a cognitive challenge; it would be a moral and psychological achievement.

A note on terminology

The meanings of libertarian free will, compatibilism, and hard determinism were provided above. As long as one remembers the basic structure of the three questions (Coherence, Compatibility, Consequences) there should be no reason for confusion. Hence, I have preserved where possible the traditional terminology, even when it is not particularly fortunate. The notable example is 'hard determinism', not usefully seen as a position on determinism but on the Compatibility Question—on the normative import of determinism or of the absence of libertarian free will, where it contrasts with 'soft determinism' or compatibilism. Compatibilists and hard determinists need

not be strictly determinists, since both positions are interpretations of the implications of the absence of libertarian free will, and the latter obtains even if determinism is tempered by some indeterminism. As long as there is no libertarian free will we need to ask whether moral responsibility and related notions are compatible with this state of affairs. Only one further potential minefield must be marked ahead of the discussion, that of utilitarianism. In some respects the utilitarian stands ‘outside’ the free will problem, for the existence of free will has no intrinsic importance for her. Historically many philosophers inclined towards utilitarian views have sought to remain within the free will debate, and such utilitarianism can curiously be found as versions of both compatibilism and hard determinism. We shall flag these variations when they come up. Beyond the familiar conceptual tools of the debate, I will gradually be introducing others, but to do so before they are needed would only be confusing. Some readers might find the Glossary useful.

PART I

Metaphysical and Ethical Foundations

[T]he most tragic problem of philosophy is to reconcile intellectual necessities with the necessities of the heart and the will.

(Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*)

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