

# Free Will

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WHAT makes people tick? That is, apart from what they *think* their motivations are at a given moment. Sex, money, status, divine grace: all these are supraindividual entities; all place the human subject in the realm of the acted-on, the epiphenomenal, the mechanical; all entail the disturbing thought that we act the way we do because something larger than ourselves—evolution, capital, social dynamics, God(s)—acts on and through us in a logic that extends beyond our own existences and perhaps our ability to comprehend. The old ticking metaphor captures the regularity of this dynamic; to capture something of its complexity, one can invoke the “algorithms” that make us act the way we do; and to suggest its uncanniness, one can turn to Lord Arthur Savile’s reflection on being told that he is destined to commit murder: “Were we no better than chessmen, moved by an unseen power, vessels the potter fashions at his fancy, for honour or for shame?”<sup>1</sup> Between clocks, algorithms, and chess, what remains of free will?

If such preoccupations seem a bit obsolete or even “Victorian” (respectively, they aren’t and they are), this is largely a reflection of the vagaries of this framing’s currency in the academic marketplace. Most humanities disciplines’ decades-long trend toward adopting some versions of the social sciences, rather than philosophy, as their privileged metadiscourse has resulted in eschewing this level of abstraction as too up-in-the-air and irrelevant to real-world preoccupations. As of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, talk of free will and its opposite, determinism, is largely confined to philosophy departments, confessional contexts, and occasionally courts of law. It isn’t a “hot button” topic, or something that most people think of as immediately relevant to their lives, and if such terms are foregrounded in cultural discourse with a reasonably wide reach, it is courtesy of repentant techno-eschatologists such as Jaron Lanier, whose first “argument for deleting your social media right now” is that “you are losing your free will”;<sup>2</sup> or historians-turned-futurists

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such as Yuval N. Harari, who has argued that both free will and liberalism are being eroded by computing power's increasing ability to predict and influence human behavior.<sup>3</sup>

While one could sometimes wish for more subtlety, especially on Harari's part, the free will vs. determinism dichotomy does strike me as a promising framing for our present moment. I suggest that the systematic application of the scientific method to human behavior, the development of technologies based on the resulting insights, and the consequently increased ability on the part of state and economic structures to streamline human behavior for maximum efficiency constitute a contemporary real-world iteration of the free will problem, one with both theoretical and ethical-political dimensions. As most societies have become increasingly technicized, the regular, predictable features of our behavior, the parts in which we are most like clocks, have correspondingly become more open to manipulation. Attempts to "push our buttons," to make us feel, believe, buy things, can now rely on a vast and expanding archive of both group- and individual-scale statistical data about people's "algorithms" that are continuously crunched by actual algorithms with the aim of predicting and directing future behavior, often in ethically and politically questionable ways, and sometimes with positively horrific by-products.<sup>4</sup> If you bought this, you'll probably enjoy that, too. If you weren't quite convinced about your local authorities' approach to the latest health emergency, here are 1,543 videos about how George Soros is trying to sap and impurify all of your precious bodily fluids. If you liked Michelle Obama's latest tweet, here are 12,452 people you might fall in love with. Individual effects may include but are not limited to compulsive behaviors, financial irresponsibility, political radicalization; societal ones include degradation of public discourse, increased concentration of wealth, environment-destroying consumerism, tribalization. But my point is that even if we set aside the undesirability of many such dynamics, the very fact that they come from large power structures and that they can influence individuals' behaviors is a problem, if one wants to maintain at least a provisional version of individual sovereignty as a model for political subjectivity.

What is Victorian about all this? My quick answer consists in two considerations, which taken together amount to a case for a renewed attention on the part of Victorianists to this philosophical quandary, on both historicist and presentist grounds.

First, a historical datum: in Great Britain, it was our period of study that saw the beginning of the statistics-based approach to the study of

human behavior, which is, in turn, the epistemological foundation of recent decades' developments in behavioral data-based extractive technologies. As they were born over the Victorian period, the social sciences defined themselves away from older approaches (philosophical or otherwise) by adopting a quantification-centered version of the empirical method ultimately derived from positivism.<sup>5</sup> Concurrently, a new fault line began to appear between the old guard's and the new barbarians' attitudes to the problem of the freedom of the will. For example, J. A. Froude clung to a more "humanistic" approach to history against the newer social sciences' methods by insisting "that there is somewhere a point of freedom [that renders] man . . . an exception in the order of nature."<sup>6</sup> H. T. Buckle, conversely, held that the only alternatives to seeing human history as the product of a statistically detectable flux of causes and effects were to see it as miraculous or random, which he regarded as absurd.<sup>7</sup>

Second, a suggestion: such discussions were not only or primarily methodological or based on disagreements about what is the case—they were also value-laden. Clearly, Froude wished to preserve some version of human specificity—let us call it autonomy—that he felt was being threatened by a certain way of approaching human behavior; could it be that there is something here that we, too, want to preserve? That Froude was a Christian conservative; that Buckle (to my mind) had the better argument as far as description is concerned; that for decades we have heard that the sovereign individual is a bourgeois fiction—none of these is a compelling reason to ignore the underlying need, which is to assert the individual right to self-determination: this, in my opinion, is a key principle to be kept in mind in facing the present moment as more and more individual agency is delegated to automated processes. If the seeds of these anxieties began to germinate in the Victorian period, a more systematic investigation of the structural and intellectual conditions that gave rise to the social sciences' systematization of human behavior could both yield insights into the Victorian period itself and, possibly, provide usable tools to approach the present configuration, in which such tendencies have moved on to the political sphere.

#### NOTES

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Short Fiction*, vol. 8 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Ian Small (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 57.

- I discuss this aspect of the story in “Oscar Wilde and the Freedom of the Will,” *English Literary History* 88, no. 1 (2021): 182–84.
2. Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Right Now* (New York: Henry Holt, 2018), 5–24.
  3. Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018).
  4. See, for example, Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2019); Miguel Benasayag, *The Tyranny of Algorithms: Freedom, Democracy, and the Challenge of AI*, translated by Steven Rendall (New York: Europa Compass, 2021).
  5. See, in general, the work of Nicholas Dames. Also, Roger Smith, *Free Will and the Human Sciences in Britain, 1870–1910* (London: Routledge, 2016), and the forthcoming three-volume *Literature and Philosophy in Nineteenth-Century British Culture*, general editor Giles Whiteley (London: Routledge, forthcoming), the third of which I have edited.
  6. James A. Froude, “Spinoza,” *Westminster Review* 64 (1885): 20.
  7. Henry T. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (Toronto: Rose Belford, 1878), 1:8–26.

