



Chapter 6, The Freedom To Be

Q: Robert, you say that we have no free will. I don't understand that at all. If I decide to have another sip of tea, my arm and hand will reach out for the cup. Did I not will that action to happen?

A: Naturally, we all have the *sensation* of free will and choice, but that is, I say, a sensation and nothing more. Choice is a story we tell ourselves after the actual "decision"—there never was any decision—has already been determined *unconsciously* as the resultant of the interplay among different parts of the brain. What *feels* to us like choice is not a voluntary decision at all, but the attribution of that neuronal dance to a fictional boss or overseer *called* myself. The overseer-myself is a ghost in the machine. There really is no little "myself" sitting in the middle of your skull deciding anything.

We all have a sensation of agency, but that sensation is like the feeling while dreaming that "I," the dreamer, have powers to influence events and determine outcomes within the dream. Upon awakening, we see that the "I" in the dream was as much a part of the dream as anything else in the dream—not in any way separate from it—and actually had no powers at all.

Since the advent of functional magnetic resonance imaging and other recent ways of studying the brain, it has become apparent that when one "chooses" to move a part of the body, the necessary preparations for executing that movement took place in the brain *before*—sometimes seconds before—there was a feeling or thought of choosing anything. So the *sensation* of choosing is really more like a *recognition*, after the fact, of unconscious occurrences than an actual choice.

Through a complex process of internal negotiation among countless neuronal connections, outcomes emerge constantly, and then “myself”—which is *not* a decider, but more like an habitual, repetitive thought—becoming aware of those *supposed* choices that never really were conscious choices at all, explains its feelings of apparent wanting and deciding by telling itself a *story* of having chosen freely.

At the time of the Upanishads, people believed that Earth was the center of the universe, and that the sun, planets, stars and other visible celestial bodies revolved around Earth. Now we know better, and may consider the ancient ones naïve. But in the matter of free will, the ancients may have understood things that most of us moderns do not. Vedanta, for example, appreciated long ago that the sense of free will is a kind of self-deception that arises with the mistaken idea that there is a *person* apart from the entirety of the universe. A similar perspective is found also in Buddhism, which points out that there never was nor will be a freestanding, separate “I,” because every apparently separate happening depends for its existence upon everything else. “Myself” is “co-dependently originated,” as this is said.

Still, those two old traditions may *seem* to agree about these matters more than they really do agree. When one looks more deeply, they are in fact at odds. Vedanta tells us that “I” exist in two senses. The first is the bodily-identified “I” which believes and feels that it has free will. This is *mithya*, or *conditional being*. And then there is the supposedly *permanent* myself that *witnesses* the conditional myself, along with everything else in the universe.

In fact, Vedanta professes that without this permanent witness-self, the universe would not exist at all—that only the light of the *Self* brings the universe into being. The Buddha, on the other hand, who had been trained in Vedanta, but at last rejected it, dismissed the Vedic idea of Self, calling it “eternalism,” and

said that there is no permanent self, nor permanent anything else.

Such traditional ideas about what constitutes the “real self,” may be worth knowing about, but if taken to be indisputable knowledge, will discourage further investigation. This closed-mindedness is characteristic of religious believers of all types, not just Vedantists and Buddhists, but Christians and Muslims too who are absolutely certain that Big Daddy watches them unceasingly, and will reward or punish them according to their faith. There may be certain kinds of wisdom in all of those traditions, but it does not extend as far as defining what “myself” is or isn’t. That, I say, is a mystery only barely glimpsed, if at all, and never fully resolved.

So many of us want to rush to judgment—to latch on to one style of belief or another, shutting the mind entirely to other possibilities. Why this impatience to explain “myself” for once and for all? Ask yourself: Is *not*-knowing really so frightening that I must hurriedly anoint as fact that which is really only conjecture? Is ambivalence so terrifying that I must prematurely embrace one particular belief or another rather than just knowing about all of them?

To support the laws and customs of the social order, we must *pretend*, perhaps, that free will actually exists. But what may work well for the maintenance of societies, may, at the same time, be poisonous to an awakening mind that needs *facts*, not pretexts and masquerades.

Despite the *feeling* of free will, and the social conventions that revolve around it, no one, I say, ever chose *anything* freely. And no one is to blame for so-called “bad choices” either. The deepest wellsprings of thought and action exist beyond our ken and beyond conscious control. I have no idea what word I will type next or where it will come from.

Freedom, I say, does not mean getting to do whatever one wishes. Nor does freedom have anything to do with so-called “free will,” which is a fantasy.

Freedom arises with the understanding that in each moment what is, is, and cannot be different, including whatever “myself” sees, feels, thinks, or does.

In the light of that understanding, while acceding outwardly to social conventions which require playing the *role* of chooser and decider (and even demand acting as if one were somehow responsible for behaviors over which one never had any actual choice), inwardly—within one’s *private* understanding—one may come clean and admit that the “myself” who chooses is a fiction, a story I have learned to tell myself. In that admission one may find freedom—not the freedom to “choose,” but the freedom to *be*.

Here is part of a conversation with neuroscientist Rudolfo Llinás:

LLINÁS: Well yeah, it’s an instrument that has a coil that you put next to the top of the head and you pass a current such that a big magnetic field is generated that activates the brain directly, without necessarily having to open the thing. So if you get one of these coils and you put it on top of the head, you can generate a movement. You put it in the back, you see a light, so you can stimulate different parts of the brain and have a feeling of what happens when you activate the brain directly without, in quotes, “you” doing it. This of course is a strange way of talking but that’s how we talk.

So I decide to put it on the top of the head where I consider to be the motor cortex and stimulate it and find a good spot where my foot on the right side would move inwards. It was “pop,” no problem. And we did it several times and I tell my colleague, I know anatomy, I know physiology, I can tell you I’m cheating. Put the stimulus and then I move, I feel it, I’m loving it.

And he said well, you know, there’s no way to really know. I said, I’ll tell you how I know. I feel it, but stimulate and I’ll move the foot outwards. I am now going to do that, so I’m stimulated and the foot moves inwards again. So he said,

well what happened? I said, "I changed my mind. Do it again." So we do it half a dozen times.

Q: And it always moves inwards?

LLINÁS: Always. So I said, oh my god, I can't tell the difference between the activity from the outside and what I consider to be a voluntary movement. If I know that it is going to happen, then I think I did it, because I now understand this free will stuff and this volition stuff. Volition is what's happening somewhere else in the brain, I know about and therefore I decide that I did it. You actually take possession of something that doesn't belong to you.

Q: So you're saying there's this straight-forward linkage between the stimulation and the foot moving inward, and that's going to happen every time, even if you will yourself to move it out and it still moves in, are you saying that you nevertheless thought your sensation was of having moved it out?

LLINÁS: No! The sensation is different. The sensation was that it was I who did it.

Q: Even though it was moving it in.

LLINÁS: It moved it in and the sensation is, well I moved it in. I could not have a feeling different to what I would have had had I moved it inwards. So I want to move it outwards, and when I feel the stimulus, I move it outwards, but it moves inwards.

Q: Did you feel that there was a problem?

LLINÁS: No, I didn't feel there was a problem, I moved it inwards!

Q: But you thought, you decided you were going to move it outwards!

LLINÁS: Yes, but I moved it inwards. And then you think and you realize that you are saying it after the fact that you moved it inwards because it moved it in the inwardly manner and you knew this was going to happen so you take possession of it. In other words, free will is knowing what you are going to do, that's all. Not necessarily willing it. It is not you who's doing it, it is many cells deciding to do it.