Free Will

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



We almost all assume that we could have acted differently than we did, and that we are, at least to some degree, in control of what will happen to us. The sense of being a chooser seems self-evident. I decide. I could have decided otherwise. My future depends on what I choose.

But is that actually so?

The belief in a powerful inner self shows up most clearly in magical thinking: the idea that by wanting something strongly enough, one can bend reality to one's will. It appears in contemporary forms like The Secret, various manifestation teachings, and personal "results" programs that promise to train the mind to produce desired outcomes.

Behind these practices lies a deep assumption: that there is a central agent inside, a little manager who steers life from the inside out.

This belief does not arise in a vacuum. It is shaped early. A child is continuously confronted with "good" and "bad" choices. Praise and punishment silently carry the message: you could have done otherwise. Over time, the notion of free will becomes axiomatic, beyond doubt. Information that confirms it is easily accepted. Information that undermines it is resisted, ignored, or forgotten.

Even before philosophy enters the picture, the self is already trained to experience itself as an author.

The coffee problem

Suppose I take a sip of coffee.

What exactly happened there? And could I truly have done otherwise?

Neuroscience has been circling this question for decades. Brain-imaging studies show measurable neural activity several seconds before a person becomes consciously aware of “deciding” to act. The hand moves, the muscles prepare, patterns unfold. Only later does the thought arise: I am going to take a sip. Sometimes it even arises after the movement has begun.

In other words: processes that never appear in experience have already set the action in motion before the feeling of deciding shows up. The decision, as experienced, arrives late. It comments on what is already happening.

If that is so, then once the action occurs, it cannot meaningfully be said that it could have failed to occur. The conditions were already in place. The movement was already underway.

When I look closely, I also notice something simpler and more intimate: I have no idea what I will think a minute from now. Thoughts appear. Sentences form. The fingers move. I hear the words in my head. I do not know where they came from. I did not summon them. Even the impulse to “decide” appears in the same way.

And if a decision is itself something that appears, then what decided that a decision should occur?

Infinite conditions

Every event depends on an uncountable number of factors: genetics, upbringing, language, culture, weather, hormones, fatigue, what someone said ten minutes ago, what happened a billion years ago. Each moment is a knot in an immeasurable web of relations that may stretch back to the formation of stars.

The feeling of free will resembles a child sitting at a steering wheel mounted on a carousel. From the seat, it feels as though steering is happening. From outside, it is obvious that the ride itself determines the motion.

The personality claims authorship and says: “I chose this. I could have chosen differently.” But what actually happens emerges from the total configuration of the moment.

This does not reduce life to a puppet show. It removes the puppet.

What happens does not happen to you. It happens as you.

Decisions are made. By no one. Or, what amounts to the same thing: by everything.

My sip of coffee is inseparable from what is happening everywhere, now. In that sense, no one is personally responsible in the way we usually imagine. Not me. Not you. There is no independent entity standing outside the flow, issuing commands.

The small inner “decider” that many people picture as their true self, a kind of executive homunculus, turns out to be a ghost in the machine.

The strange relief

We cannot, at any moment, be other than what we are. But it is equally true that understanding is also something that happens. Seeing this is itself an event among events, and it changes the configuration.

Sometimes, when it is clearly seen that what happens is what happens, and that nothing else could have happened, something softens. A certain tension relaxes. The private burden of authorship loosens its grip.

What remains is not fatalism, but a different intimacy with life. Less management. Less inner commentary. More participation.

Nietzsche called this amor fati: not merely bearing what is necessary, but loving it. Not hiding from what is, and not demanding that it be other.

Not because it is good.

But because it is what is happening.

Enjoy the ride!