

## Response to Ed Hudgins, “Is There a Dual Aspect of Free Will?”

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I want to thank Ed Hudgins for his paper on the different aspects of free will. It was a stimulating paper, and I think it offers a compelling starting place for a healthy discussion about the objectivist theory of free will.

As an overview, I'd like to confine my comments mostly to the beginning of the paper. In general, I will argue that there are some metaphysical difficulties around the issue, not only of what volition is, but how it is defended, and what the relationship between volition and causality more broadly construed is.

### Nitpicks and Typos

This is just to be taken in passing. All things considered, this is more of a molehill than a mountain, and I don't want it to be confused for the latter.

A key issue that I do not see addressed to my satisfaction in Hudgins's paper is how to define free will and volition. The two components of free will, the “free” and the “will,” indicate where typical definitions put their emphasis. Free will, in the literature I've read, is sometimes treated as a *condition*, as in the state of being free. (Parenthetically, this seems to be the approach gaining ascendancy now. It's common to simply see “free will” referred to as “freedom” simpliciter. The recent treatment by Daniel C. Dennett, for example, was entitled *Freedom Evolves*, not *Free Will Evolves*.) But the “will” (or drive) can also receive the attention, as it does in Descartes and Locke, as well as the contemporary accounts of Dennis Stampe (forthcoming), Rogers Albritton (1985) and others. Unfortunately for us, Hudgins does not iron down which, if either, of these approaches he takes to most accurately capture Rand's theory.

Hudgins's paper seems, at least at first, to emphasize free will as a condition. He writes, for example, that reason is a *volitional capacity*, though he later addresses different components of the will as a drive. Given that the paper is focused more on different aspects of the will, it strikes me that he favors the will interpretation, despite the arguments for freedom that take up the beginning of the paper. But if Hudgins is more interested in the nature of will and willing, as the latter half the paper suggests, it strikes me that he need not even invoke freedom at all. Not that freedom is unimportant, but it brings up a host of philosophical questions and issues that are not necessarily pertinent to question of how the will operates, what weakness of will is, or what it is to will moral and immoral action.

And as someone who regularly grades philosophy papers, I cannot help but play the grammar nazi and observe the following typos.

- a) “... letting our minds drift **was** (as?) we lie on a beach.” (p. 2).
- b) “And since man's soul has an objective nature, **if** (it?) might take ...” (p. 6)
- c) [Quoting Rand, top of the page] “an unfocused (mind?) is *not* conscious.” (p. 7)
- d) “Rand was **tight** (right?) when she said that, 'Existentially... ’” (p. 12).

## Everything in its place: the Conceptual Hierarchy

Hudgins's description of the first act of will, however accurately it may capture Rand's own account, runs into conceptual trouble. He writes, “Rand also saw the first act of will or volition as the first moral act of good, not to think or to evade is the first act of evil. Rand thus saw both an ethical and epistemological aspect to the will. Further, it is because we have volition that a code of values is necessary to guide us and that we are held responsible for our own actions” (Hudgins 1).

This leads me to my primary objection to the idea that free will has an “ethical aspect.” If freedom is a condition, then as a condition it is not one that exists, by Rand's theory, until there is thought, and focus. A code of values is necessary, and I would contend, even meaningful to us, when there is volition. Ought implies can, and we cannot be held accountable for things that we did when there was literally no choice. But if this is all true, then from where comes the ability to not only judge the choice of whether to think (before there is a code of values) or the ability to “choose” to think (before there is the focus that makes freedom possible)? The philosophical hierarchy set forth by Rand, Aristotle and others locates ethics as secondary to metaphysics and epistemology, so it would be strange to find an ethical claim as contemporary with a metaphysical claim. It would be more accurate to say that the metaphysical facts of the matter give rise to certain ethical implications.<sup>1</sup>

David Kelley, when reviewing Peikoff's *OPAR*, captured this idea well. He writes,

Ayn Rand showed that values arise from the need of living organisms to maintain themselves by acting in specific ways in the face of the constant alternative of life or death. In the case of man, who has free will, **moral values depend on his choice to accept and pursue life as an ultimate goal.** As she says in Galt's speech, "My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists—and in a single choice: to live." The choice to live therefore **precedes all morality**, as Peikoff notes. **It is the foundation of all normative claims, and so cannot itself be morally evaluated.** (Kelley 1992, emphasis mine).

If it is literally the case that *only* because we have volition that “a code of values is necessary to guide us and that we are held responsible for our own actions,” then it is impermissible to subject whatever acts make volition possible to moral evaluation. Kelley above speaks of the *choice* to live as the foundation of moral values, so if we assume, as we must, that freedom must exist before this decision to live can be made, it would be even more true that the initial act of volition could not be morally evaluated, much less have a “moral aspect.”

Going this far, however, does not entail that people who, as Pink Floyd discuss, exchange the “walk-on part in the war for the lead role in the cage” are free from moral evaluation. It only means that in examining the moral aspects of accepting one's freedom, Hudgins is perhaps too charitable to those who evade their freedom. If there is one concept of great worth from the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, I would point his treatment of personal responsibility and bad faith. One hardly must endorse all of the more peculiar things Sartre does with this idea to understand that agents, despite truly having freedom, often blame factors outside of their control for their predicament. Whether it's the troubled childhood, the media, or fast food, it is easy for many to deny their own complicity in their ruin and blame anyone but oneself.<sup>2</sup> Bad faith is the state an

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1 This may only be a claim to the effect that free will does not have an ethical aspect, but rather a *metaethical* aspect.

2 There are also cases in which the person simply does not understand their own freedom or that they are evading

agent is in when he or she denies the reality of his/her freedom to choose, and although Sartre doesn't quite put it this way, it would be fair to understand bad faith as one, if not the, primary source of immorality.<sup>3</sup>

How does this apply to Hudgins's paper? The evader, I would argue, is guilty of bad faith. It is not that she abandons her volition, because once acquired, freedom cannot be abandoned.<sup>4</sup> We have freedom whether we like it or not; we are, as Sartre writes, “Condemned to be free.” Rather, the nature of evasion is such that the evader is in self-deception about how free she actually is. But note that the decision to accept or deny one's freedom comes not only after the acquisition of volition, but also after the choice to live, so at this stage the agent may be morally judged. By obscuring her own freedom, whether actively or passively, the agent undermines her own virtue, happiness, pursuit of value, and *eudaimonia*. We need not accept the bulk of Sartre's existentialism to appreciate that, on a metaethical level, the idea of inescapable freedom and bad faith both offer useful conceptual tools to understand the relationship between free will and ethics.

I also note, in passing, that this account would far more compliment than hurt the thrust of Hudgins's approach. On page 7, for instance, to avoid a possible confusion with Rand's discussion of what happens when a person unfocuses their mind, he writes, “If we could be on the same level of consciousness as a lower animal, we would not be morally responsible agents when in that state. Yet every human act, whether focused or unfocused, is an act of will.” If every act of will is understood to be freely undertaken, then whether the agent accepts his freedom or escapes it in bad faith, the agent is always responsible for his acts. But it is one thing to note that the agent always has free will, and that she is responsible for her acts and habits. It is another to attach moral import to the very capacity that itself makes morality possible.

### **Validating and/or Proving Free Will**

Also unclear is how we can validate the existence of free will, much less as an axiomatic truth. Hudgins's paper offers two lines of justification. First, he argues that the hard determinist, in attempting to argue against the reality of free will, necessarily must implicitly assume free agents who can reason, and be rationally persuaded to freely accept the truth of hard determinism. This contradiction, he holds, self-negates hard determinism as a viable thesis, so we can safely assume the reality of free will.

But this argument is highly problematic. It is a benign form of the argument ad hominem: benign, because no specific individual's character is attacked, but fallacious nonetheless because it serves to distract from the question of whether the thesis under consideration, hard determinism, is true. But the possible truth of hard determinism, like the possible truth of any proposition, does not depend on the internal consistency of the speaker. It depends, instead, on whether it accurately describes reality.

To illustrate: suppose I program a computer with an English grammar and lexical database, and instruct it to spit out randomly constructed, but sensible, sentences. The statements it spits out are either true or false - “Snow is white” vs. “Statism is fun.” One day, it spits out:

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it. In such cases, Rand's distinction between errors of morality and knowledge is helpful.

3 Sartre would be unlikely to call it “immorality,” though unlike what the “amoral existentialist” stereotype might suggest, he was very much interested in ethics. See his *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1992), or Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948).

4 One possible exception might be cases of Alzheimer's or other brain illnesses. As mental functions break down and the mind itself unravels, we would also expect the agent's free will to break down accordingly, little by little. My discussion here assumes a normally functioning mind.

“Hard determinism is true, and freedom is an illusion.” We could wonder whether the computer had enough AI to understand the implications of the statement, but the more interesting question is whether this statement is true or not.<sup>5</sup> If we are reasoning in a way that respects the philosophy hierarchy between metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, etc., there is nothing at this early stage of metaphysical reasoning that rules out the thesis of hard determinism (that will come, but it comes further down the chain).

The second argument Hudgins cites to validate free will appeals to *introspection*. I do not take issue with introspection as a valid means of gaining knowledge, but it is problematic here because Hudgins argues that free will is an axiomatic truth. Experience, or lack thereof, should not be necessary to validate axiomatic truths.<sup>6</sup> But this does not mean that there is no place for introspective awareness of freedom in the free will debate. Ordinarily, if someone claims that what I am seeing is not real, or what I think I experience is not, in fact, reality, we would probably not give that person the benefit of the doubt. If I view a blue sky, and someone tells me it's actually green, my interlocutor would have the burden not only of proving that the sky is actually green, but also of explaining how it is that I would somehow have the experience of blue. Presumably, if the person is an eye doctor, and I have some color blindness that causes me to confuse my perception of color, then he'd have a case. Hard determinists, in contrast, have had a lot of trouble on this score.

But note that this is not a knock-down argument for volition. This is only a presumption in favor of volition, and perhaps, a bit of burden tennis. It is not an axiomatic validation of free will, any more than it would be a validation of believing that my belief that “the sky is blue” is axiomatically true.

### **The Relationship Between Causality and Volition.**

Although Hudgins acknowledges that a paper of this limited scope cannot deal with the full implications of this observation, he claims it is “important to understand that recognizing unique attributes of volition does not negate the concept of causality; rather, volition is a particular instance of causality. In our choice to focus or not, the cause is in us” (Hudgins 4).

It is important that more (metaphysical) libertarian-flavored theories of volition avoid dualism, and this is one method. Otherwise, libertarians face the Casper the Friendly Ghost problem (Dennett 1991 36). In the old comic strips, Casper sometimes has the power to walk through walls, and items thrown in his direction pass directly through him, leaving him unaffected. Yet in other occasions, Casper intervenes causally with the world around him – as a reliably friendly ghost, he grabs a child falling from a high window, for example, and sets her safely on the ground. Whatever volition is, it cannot have this contradictory relationship with

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5 An attack along these lines could be waged against the explanations for why Existence, Identity and Consciousness are axiomatic. But unlike the possibility of hard determinism, the three primary axioms are not empirical theses. It is not *just* the case that the three cannot be refuted without assuming their truth; it is that they *cannot even literally be thought* to be true. Hard determinists can think their thesis to be true, even if they are wrong, but one literally cannot think existence, identity and consciousness to be unreal unless perhaps one simply doesn't understand what the terms mean.

6 An arguable exception might be Consciousness, but awareness of an *experiential phenomenon*, as opposed to awareness of awareness as such, are different matters. Consciousness is properly understood just when one grasps that he or she is aware of *existence*, and then realizes the implication of being *aware* of existence. This is not like my awareness of experiencing my two hands, regardless of how inescapable and apodictically certain of a Moorean truth that may be (to mix metaphors).

causality, in which it is free from being affected or reducible to the sum of causal forces acting upon it, yet also be a physical part of the world, capable of action and able to create new causal chains. Hudgins, perhaps agreeing with Peikoff, therefore claims that rather than either being free from external causes (as in libertarian free will theories) or reducible to such causes (as in hard determinism), volition is itself a form of causality, not an exception to it (Peikoff 110).

But this account creates more questions than satisfactory answers. Hudgins argues that volition is not, itself, reducible to causality (Hudgins 4), which is strange if volition is, itself, a form of causality.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it creates a new question as to what relationship volition, as form of causality, has to the other forms causality may take. It does no work toward circumnavigating the Casper problem to simply label volition a “form of causality,” if this special form of causality raises the same unanswered questions and disadvantages as other libertarian theories of volition, in which all volitional beings are “prime movers unmoved.” If volition is bottled up within, say, a Venn diagram of all forms of causality, avoiding the question of how causal forces relate to freedom, how the smaller circle can act upon the larger circle but not vice versa, the mystery that plagued dualism since before Descartes remains.

A cause may be in us, but only if that cause itself has some relation to the rest of the world, which means that reduction may have to remain in the picture, as compatibilism suggests. Hudgins clearly wants to frame freedom of the will within the otherwise non-mysterious causal world, acknowledging that volition should not be taken to be a magic ability to change the status of the world or one's own soul apart from the tools already on hand. I might briefly offer one avenue of exploration for Hudgins on this point: looking to psychological factors like “character,” “virtue/vice,” “habit,” and the like, as sources of explanation for the choices people make. Freedom would hardly be worth the name if it meant that one should also be free from one's own character, as if character were something separate and external from the self.<sup>8</sup>

In any event, I hope these comments are as thought-provoking as Hudgins paper was for me. The process of developing this response helped me clarify my own thoughts on this subject, so even where I disagreed with Hudgins, I found the experience edifying.

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7 Getting into the issue of “agent” vs. “event” causation would take this response a bit astray, but I will observe that however an objectivist theory of agent causation is ultimately articulated, it must be mindful of this problem. It is appropriate to observe that as a model of causation, event-causation has problems, especially when it comes to accurately describing consciousness. But while causation may offer different metaphysical or epistemological forms, they should not be so different that they are insulated from each other. It should all be either one model, or multiple models that at least potentially have some story that can unify the accounts.

8 A favorite expression of Dennett's from *Freedom Evolves* seems apt here: If you make yourself small enough, you can externalize everything. When we theorize about freedom, we are too apt to forget that we are not slaves to our passions, experiences, habits, character and above all our reason: we *are* our passions, experiences, etc. Understood this way, worries about, say, psychological determinism seem ill-formed: one cannot be enslaved to oneself.

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