

# Free will: objective and subjective perspectives



**Condemned To Be Free**  
Peter Pullen, 2016

Prof. Shai Frogel  
Kibbutzim College of Education  
&  
Tel Aviv University

**Assumption:** The dominance of empirical science threatens the idea of free will.

**Goal:** The paper challenges this tendency by two philosophical perspectives:



**1. Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy:**

- a. The determinism of natural science cannot exclude the possibility of free will.
- b. Moral thinking implies the existence of free will.

**Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism:**

- a. freedom is the way we experience our existence.
- b. Freedom is the origin of our existential anxiety but also the origin of our ethical responsibility



## Kant: free will is a postulate of reason

“The moral law, which itself does not require a justification, proves not merely the possibility of freedom, but that it really belongs to beings who recognize this law as binding on themselves”. (*Critique of practical reason*, 5: 164)

“But if our critique is not in error in teaching that the object is to be taken in a twofold sense, namely as appearance and as a thing in itself if the deduction of the concepts of understanding is valid, and the principle of causality therefore applies only to things taken in the former sense, namely, insofar as they are objects of experience[...]then there is no contradiction in supposing that one and the same will is, in the appearance, that is, in its visible acts, necessarily subject to the law of nature, and so far not free, while yet, as belonging to a thing in itself, it is not subject to that law, and is therefore free”. (*Critique of pure reason*, B: xxvii-xxviii)

“[F]reedom and an unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other.”(*Critique of practical reason*, 5:141).

**Conclusion:** Our moral thinking could not be but a product of free will, which is transcendental phenomenon rather than empirical one; it is a condition of our moral experience and not an objective fact.

## Sartre: freedom is the first existential truth

“Anguish, abandonment, responsibility, whether muted or full strength, constitute the quality of our consciousness in so far as this is pure and simple freedom. (*Being and Nothingness*, 464)

Consciousness ('being for itself' / *être pour soi*) is not an object ('being in itself' / *être en soi*), but a being in which objects appear.

A being that is "for itself" is not indifferent to the world as a thing but engages with the world, bringing with it its own intentions and ends.

Our first-person experience is a composition of being and nothingness.

The fact that we experience the world as if it can be otherwise revealing our existential freedom.

The difference between passions and free will is merely a difference between reflective attitudes and non-reflective ones.

**Conclusion:** Our sense of freedom makes us feel responsible for the world, and since freedom is the constitutive principle of our entire psychic life, the demand for responsibility always accompanies our existence.

## Conclusions

It is important to distinguish between the mind (a subjective aspect of our existence) and the brain (an empirical object). The mind is an unobservable first-person experience and the brain is an object of a third-person observation.

Empirical determinism assumes probability rather than necessity and therefore leaves room for the existence of free will.

Our capability to formulate moral laws implies that we have free will, since these laws are *a priori* (of our reason) and not *a posteriori* (of our experience). Accordingly, our existence is determined by two kinds of causes: empirical (natural causality) and abstract (free will).

Objects appear within the limits of the intentions and ends of a consciousness, which experiences them as contingent. This reveals that freedom is a constitutive principle of consciousness and therefore Man is "condemned to be free."

Free will, like passion, is a manifestation of the freedom of consciousness. The difference between passions and free will is the difference between reflective attitudes and non-reflective ones.

Freedom implies responsibility, and this explains our psychological distress as well as our ethical life, and the linkage between them.

*Thank you for your  
good will*