

What is Free Will?

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- 1 Imagine you are a junior in high school browsing through dozens of catalogues, sorting through the location, size, and offerings at colleges and universities across the country. You finally settle on your first-choice school after weighing the options and making up your own mind. The choice is fully your own.
- 2 Would you be surprised to hear that not everyone would agree with you? For centuries, philosophers, theologians, and scientists have debated whether humans have free will to make decisions.

What is Free Will?

- 3 Free will is the concept that humans have the power and capacity to make their own choices. These decisions are made independently without influence from external forces in the universe, such as fate.
- 4 Proponents of free will believe that humans have agency, which allows them to shape their own future, both in the short term and the long term. From deciding whether to put butter or Nutella on one's morning toast to determining one's career path, humans possess the ability to make up their minds, as well as change them!
- 5 Opponents of free will believe that humans do not have full agency over their actions. One philosophy opposed to the concept of free will is fatalism. Fatalists believe that a supernatural power controls every human's destiny and that humans do not have the ability to change the course of their lives.

History of Free Will

- 6 The concept of free will has developed throughout the centuries of human history. Greek philosophers theorized about the extent to which humans are responsible for their own actions. While Aristotle did not use the term "free will," he did write about the relationship between voluntary choices and the moral responsibility one has for those decisions.
- 7 Theologians also continue to debate the relationship and potential contradictions between free will and an all-powerful god(s). In Judaism, religious leaders believe that God plays a role in the lives of humans but that humans also have the agency to follow God's law regarding what is right and wrong.

Impact of Free Will Today

- 8 Today, belief in free will impacts the moral fabric of how humans view one another and how society functions.
- 9 If a man decides to rob a bank, should his behavior be judged using the logic that he freely chose to commit this action? Research shows that most people agree that people have the power and responsibility to choose whether to act morally or immorally, outside of certain parameters such as age. Under the logic of free will, the robber freely chose to commit a crime and therefore should be prosecuted under the law.
- 10 Some philosophers even theorize that without free will, society would collapse. If people no longer believe that they have control over their actions and will be rewarded or punished based on those actions, immoral behavior in society would increase exponentially.