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Chapter 5:

Free Will Skepticism in Action

The point is not always to speculate, but also ultimately to think about applying our knowledge. Today, however, he who lives in conformity with what he teaches is taken for a dreamer.

--Immanuel Kant

5.1 Introduction

As I have noted in the previous chapter, the vast majority of philosophers (and non-philosophers for that matter) regard the denial of free will and moral responsibility with deep pessimism. They see a life without free will and RMR [robust moral responsibility] as a dreadful one—bereft of dignity, respect, and many important kinds of love. Libertarians tend to be the gloomiest with compatibilists not far behind. There are even some free will skeptics, most notably Saul Smilansky, who argue that we should preserve the illusion of free will. Why? Because stripping it away would be dangerous and discouraging for too many people.

In this chapter I will argue that the fears about free will skepticism are unwarranted, and almost always based on a distorted view of what the position really

entails. Free will skepticism is in many ways a radical view, but it is one that may be adopted with excitement, curiosity, optimism, and good humor.¹

5.2 The Level of the Individual.

Philosophers and scientists who discuss the implications of free will skepticism tend to look at the matter at the societal level: they ask what might happen to an entire culture that did away with the concepts of free will and RMR. B.F. Skinner, for example, in his books *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* and *Walden II*, presents a detailed examination of what might happen to a social order that based its laws and norms on hard determinist principles. Derk Pereboom, in *Living Without Free Will*, devotes some discussion to the implications for the individual, but focuses the majority of his discussion on how hard incompatibilism would affect institutions such as the criminal justice system. This Chapter will not engage in much speculation or discussion about the societal implications of free will skepticism. This is simply because questions about the individual implications are more urgent. It is indeed arguable that no society (especially in the West) will *ever* fully embrace the notion that we are not free and RMR. Powerful psychological and cultural forces are at work urging us to be realists of these concepts; and most people lack the time, resources, and the inclination to resist

¹ This Chapter will be more conversational in style than the previous ones. Rather than addressing the views of other philosophers in great detail, I will simply present my own view of what becoming a free will skeptic would mean for the individual. I should repeat, however, that Waller, Spinoza, Skinner, and especially Pereboom (in his book *Living Without Free Will*) also provide optimistic accounts of the implications of free will skepticism that are in some ways similar to my own.

them. Individuals, on the other hand, can become committed free will skeptics at any time.

The primary question I will address, then, is how an individual would live his or her life according to the principles of free will skepticism in *today's* world—a world where the notions of libertarian free will, robust moral responsibility, and justified retribution still hold sway—and show little sign of disappearing.

5.3 The Free Will Skeptic as Go-Getter

One common fear is that denying free will would lead to a kind of paralysis, a diminishing of the desire to achieve. Free will skeptics often hear this question: “if what you’re saying is true, why bother getting up in the morning? What’s the point of doing anything. Why not just sit at home and watch T.V.” This worry, however, is based on the common confusion (discussed briefly in Chapter 2) between free will skepticism and fatalism.

A recent study at San Diego State University can help make this distinction sharp. The study, led by UCSD Psychologist Jean Twenge, determined that “30% of young Americans now believe their lives are controlled by outside forces rather than by their own achievements, as compared to young people in the 60s and 70s. Twenge remarks:

These findings are very disturbing, because previous research found that young people with these beliefs are more likely to be low achievers in school, exhibit delinquent behavior, cope poorly with stress, and become depressed. Our generation has given up. We’re looking at ‘Generation Whatever,’ with many

kids feeling like they can't make a difference. Most feel that luck is a stronger determinant of their future than their own power to make things happen.²

You might think that the free will skeptic would fit right in with 'Generation Whatever.'

But in fact, free will skeptics have *no reason at all* to subscribe to the notion that outside forces control their destiny. They have no reason to become low achievers, to reject ambition, nor to believe that their lives will end up a certain way no matter what they do.

The children and college students in this study are fatalists, not free will skeptics. Fatalism is the stuff of myths, astrologers, new age religion, and Greek tragedy. Consider Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. The Oracle of Delphi decreed that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. *No matter what he did*, this was going to happen—it was his destiny. And that is what happened: he killed his father and married his mother, without, of course, knowing that he was doing it. Along the way, Oedipus made many free choices, many moral choices, choices for which he and the audience believed he was morally responsible. Only *one* thing was set in stone—that he would kill his father and marry his mother. And there was nothing he could do to prevent this.

That is a vivid example of fatalism in action. Note two things about fatalism. First, Oedipus himself has no control over whether he commits the fated acts in question. He does not *choose* to perform them; on the contrary, he tries his best not to do so. The events occur solely as a result of "outside forces." Second, setting aside these two acts over which he has no control, Oedipus seems to have *complete control*

² Twenge et al, 2005.

over everything else. He seems to the reader or audience completely free and morally responsible in every other respect. Imagine a map in which huge number of different roads all lead to the same place. And imagine that not only are you fully free to choose any of these roads, you're fully free to conduct yourself however you like *on* these roads. The only thing you know for sure is that eventually you'll end up at a single destination. That's fatalism.

Free will skepticism is both more and less constraining than fatalism. The way in which it is less constraining, however, is crucial. To deny free will is in no way to deny that our choices and decisions have significant causal influence over our destiny. It is true that that the way we end up is ultimately something for which we are not morally responsible. But from this it does not follow that “outside forces” determine our destinies. “Inside forces”—our character, decisions, the energy and discipline we muster, our passion, desire, and intelligence—play a crucial role in determining our futures. The free will skeptic denies that we are RMR for possessing these “inside forces”; he does not deny that these forces exist.

Jean Twenge, then, presents us with a false dichotomy when she says: “Most feel that luck is a stronger determinant of their future than their own power to make things happen.” Her implication is that anything that is controlled by outside forces is a matter of luck whereas anything that is “in our own power” is not. But this is wrong. As I showed in Chapter One, everything that is “in our own power” is *also* matter of luck. Michael Jordon, for example, was lucky to have the, power, the athletic ability, to dunk the basketball from the free throw line. Most people, no matter how hard they

train, cannot dunk at all, never mind from the free throw line. Yet this ability was not an outside force. It was an *inside* force, it was within his power.

Of course, the *choices* Jordan made throughout his career were crucial to his success on the basketball court as well. Had Jordan not decided to work obsessively on his game, his jump shot, passing, and defense, he would not be known as the greatest basketball player ever to play the game. One might think that *those* decisions, unlike his leaping ability, were not a matter of luck. *He* made them, he sacrificed, and for this he deserves praise. But for the reasons discussed in Chapter One, we must view all decisions, including those involving “will power” and self-discipline, as ultimately something for which he is not RMR—no more so than the natural ability itself. But this does not mean that Jordan *lacked* will power and self-discipline. On the contrary, he obviously had these traits. What he lacks is *robust moral responsibility* for having them.

The point is that there are at least two varieties of luck that determine our futures. There is *external luck*—winning the lottery, for example, or having parents with friends in high places.³ And then there is *internal luck*: the talents we possess, the intelligence, discipline, desires, passions, disabilities and so on. These internal factors have enormous causal influence over our futures. We are simply not responsible for the degree to which we possess them nor for how we are able to employ them. Whether the factors are internal or external, they still all come down to luck.⁴

³ Nagel (1982) subdivides what I call external luck into “circumstantial” and ‘consequentialist’ luck.

⁴ Out of context this claim might seem to be question-begging, but see Chapter One for a detailed defense.

So the answer to “why get up in the morning” is easy. Because I have to go to work. Because I want to see my baby daughter. Because my wife and I are going out to a nice breakfast. Because the Red Sox are playing the Yankees and Schilling is pitching. Because I want to write a paper, or a book, or take my dog for a walk. Because I promised myself to build the habit of reading and writing seven hours a day. Because life is fun. None of these motivations is undermined by free will skepticism. (A better question might be: why should we *stay* in bed in the morning. There’s a lot to do!) Ambition, the desire to achieve great things, to move up the corporate ladder, to get tenure, to become a great athlete, novelist, lawyer, actor, carpenter—all of these desires are fully compatible with free will skepticism; obviously so, unless one confuses it with fatalism.

A final objection on this score: Okay, but why should I *want* to be, say, a great novelist if I’m not going to be RMR for all the hard work that such a career requires?⁵ Again the answer is easy: because there is an intrinsic satisfaction writing an accomplished novel (never mind all the trappings that come with it—the adulation, book tours, readings, writer’s colonies in exotic places). If you are an aspiring novelist and those experiences sound attractive to you, then you have to work to achieve them. That is a simple fact of life. If you are lucky enough to have the talent and discipline to produce a few great books, why would the fact that you are not RMR for your success make any difference? There is a certain vanity involved in this need to be robustly

⁵ Kane (1996) and Ekstrom (2001), for example, argue that lacking ultimate responsibility for our actions would diminish the value of our achievements.

responsible for our triumphs. Success may be enjoyed without believing that we are in some fundamental way deserving of it.⁶

Free will skepticism has many obvious advantages in the workplace as well. One of the major sources of unhappiness in almost every field is the resentment and bitterness we feel towards colleagues or superiors. Career competition brings out the worst in many of us. The best way to handle Machiavellian co-workers is to regard them with the objective attitude. Doing this means not taking any slights or injuries personally, and doing what is best to further our own ends. Free will skepticism allows us to put our troubles and failings (and the failings of others) into perspective—to regard them pragmatically, compassionately, and with a sense of humor. A scheming, hyper-ambitious colleague is likely not very happy himself. We may feel sorry for him that he had the misfortune to turn out this way. And in our less compassionate moments, we can laugh at the folly of placing excessive importance on career advancement. What we won't do is waste valuable time and energy resenting his attempts to harm us.

5.4 The Free Will Skeptic and the Villains of History (and of Today)

One of the hardest things to swallow about free will skepticism is the 'exoneration' of brutal murderous tyrants—men (or women) who have overseen the systematic murder of millions of innocent people. Some see this implication of free

⁶ This same line of argument may be applied to any career, for any person. Not being morally responsible for our success and failure should in no way diminish the desire to attain more of the former and less of the latter.

will skepticism as a kind of *reductio* argument. ('If what you're saying is true, then Hitler is not deserving of blame for what he did. And we know *that's* not the case.')

This, of course, is not a valid argument. It is certainly *possible* that Hitler does not ultimately deserve blame for all the horrifying acts that he committed, however counterintuitive this claim might appear. And in fact this is exactly what the free will skeptic must concede. The LSE argument⁷ is not meant to apply to everyone but Hitler. The LSE argument applies to everyone, period.

Let us take a moment, however, to remind ourselves what this view does *not* entail. All of the following claims are compatible with Hitler not being RMR for the horrors of the Third Reich.

1. The acts that Hitler committed were horrific, evil, and wicked.
2. If he had been caught, he ought to have been executed in the Nuremberg trials.
3. Western Europe and the United States ought to have done everything in their power to stop him.
4. (A surprising one, perhaps) The widespread *belief* that Hitler was RMR for his actions may have provided the *necessary* motivation for the leaders and citizens and soldiers of these countries to defeat him. (In other words, if the error theory

⁷ The LSE ("Luck Swallows Everything") argument is presented in Chapter One of the dissertation. It is inspired by Strawson's "basic argument," a version of which is at <http://www.naturalism.org/strawson.htm>.

I defend had gained widespread acceptance in the early 1940s, then Hitler might have won the war.⁸)

If all of these claims are compatible with free will skepticism, one might ask what exactly we are saying about our attitude to Hitler? Only this: that in our heart of hearts we must recognize that it was ultimately a matter of very bad luck (both for himself and his millions of victims) that Hitler was the type of person he was. And so even if he had been caught, and put to death in the Nuremberg trials (to discourage other potential dictators), it would not be a punishment that he ultimately deserved.

Incidentally, one of the benefits of taking this attitude towards Hitler is that there will no longer be rampant indignation every time a filmmaker or novelist produces a work that attempts to “humanize Hitler.” One sees this kind of reaction all the time. The reaction is irrational for many reasons, not least of which is due to the biological fact that he *was* a human being. Regarding Hitler with the objective attitude, and trying to discover exactly how he became what he was, can help us to prevent future tyrants from rising to power. Examining the culture and environment that helped to shape Hitler from youth to adulthood might quite plausibly give us some important insights as to how such a moral monster can emerge, thrive, and come into power. But this kind of examination requires a dispassionate analysis, one that ought not to be self-righteously attacked whenever it stumbles upon an obvious human virtue that someone like Hitler possessed.

⁸ I am not saying that this claim is true. I have no idea whether it is or not. I am only observing that it is compatible with the truth of free will skepticism

Generalizing a little, the free will skeptic will likely view all of the terrible villains of history in this dispassionate way. After a tsunami ravaged Indonesia, resulting in the death of tens of thousands of people, we did not seethe with bitterness towards the tsunami or the earthquake that caused it. More productively, we took immediate measures to prevent such a tragedy from occurring again. The free will skeptic may view someone like Hitler as a tsunami, a terrible tragedy—one that must never be allowed to infect the world again. As for Hitler *himself*, he is worth thinking about to the extent that thinking about him can aid us in the task of preventing another genocide of that scale.

A more difficult question concerns how we should regard contemporary villains, especially if attributing RMR to them will motivate us to act against them. I must repeat that even if it is useful or beneficial to view someone as RMR for their actions, this does not mean that they *are* RMR for their behavior. (A pass-rusher in the NFL might find it useful to regard the opposing quarterback as a child molester, but that does not make it true.) But the question remains: how should we, as individuals, regard someone who is currently threatening our values and way of life?

To answer this question, it will be helpful to return to the normative theory of “sophisticated moral instrumentalism” described in Chapter 2. SMI, recall, proposes that we set ends for ourselves and then try to discover the best means of achieving those ends. Hitler in the 1930s and 40s was a tremendous threat to everything that Europeans were trying to achieve. One did not have to believe that he was deserving of blame in order to support every effort to stop his advances. But what about the United States?

Assume, as many did, that Hitler was not a direct threat to the security of our citizens. If we did not believe that he was an evil and blameworthy, would we have had sufficient motivation to sacrifice so many of our own citizens' lives to defeat him?

The answer, I think, is clearly yes. One obvious motivation for defeating the Nazis was to stop the terrible atrocities they were committing—to end the suffering that these atrocities caused. It was not simply to defeat an evil man and bring him to justice. Indeed, one may ask whether bringing Hitler to justice *on its own* could serve as a justification for the sacrifice of even *one* American life. Imagine, the following scenario. The holocaust has been stopped, the Nazis defeated. But now you are presented with the following choice. Hitler can go free to live on an island where he can harm no one else; or he can be brought to trial or killed. The latter alternative, however, would require the sacrifice of an American soldier. No matter what you believe about free will, would such a sacrifice be justified? If you answer no, then you must agree that giving his Hitler his just-deserts could provide very little, if any, *additional* justification for entering the war. As long as we agree that preventing further genocide was worth dying for, then we have all the justification and motivation we need to enter a similar type of war.

This is all well and good, one might object, if you are a citizen; if all you are doing is providing moral or financial support for a war, never getting in harm's way yourself. But what if you are a soldier, one who has to do the fighting yourself? Here, one might say, it is obvious that the assignment of RMR to the enemy is essential for doing what it takes to defeat him.

Well, perhaps. This is more of a question for psychologists than philosophers. Perhaps a retributive streak is necessary to motivate the type of behavior that wins battles. Again, if this is true, it does not mean that the enemy *is* RMR (recall the pass-rusher and the quarterback); rather it means that being in error about RMR is an advantage on the battlefield. On the other hand, respect rather than hatred for one's enemy has a long tradition in the history of combat as well. As for the free will skeptic who finds himself on the front lines, one might expect that his visceral emotions would motivate the appropriate behavior. Would these emotions be in some sense irrational? Some of them perhaps. But there is nothing irrational about killing someone who is attempting to do the same to you—even if that person is not RMR for his actions.

5.5 The Free Will Skeptic as Philanthropist.

Another concern about free will skepticism is that it would take away our motivation to be charitable. Without blame and praise and moral responsibility, why sacrifice our own interests to help others? This concern paradoxically prompted Smilansky (1994) to make a rather elegant argument for the claim that there are ethical *advantages* to hard determinism.⁹ Why? Because when you know that you are not deserving of praise for charitable behavior, but you do it anyway, then the act has greater moral purity. We can see similar sentiments expressed in major religions. The

⁹ Apparently, these advantages are not sufficient for Smilansky to promote the widespread acceptance of this view, however.

Hebraic Talmud, for example, sets forth a hierarchy of *tsedakah*, or charity—the second highest level being one in which the donation is completely anonymous: when neither party knows the other’s identity.¹⁰ Just below this is giving when you know the recipient’s identity but the recipient does not know yours. The message here is that there is an intrinsic satisfaction and goodness in the act of giving to those need, one that is entirely independent of whether the giver is recognized as a good person, or deserving of praise for being one.

For these reasons, those who see RMR skepticism as a threat to philanthropic behavior are put in a rather uncomfortable position. They must either divorce the goodness of the act from the praiseworthiness of the agent, or they must concede that the desire to be deserving of praise is a significant motivating factor for charitable activity. And there is something rather vain about this desire, something that conflicts with many of the virtues we associate with philanthropy.

Objection: Vain it may be, but is also a simple fact of human psychology. We need to see ourselves as RMR in order to perform acts that conflict with our self-interests. We need to view ourselves as praiseworthy in order to sacrifice our self-interests to help others. Shedding the illusion of RMR would therefore cause us to drastically reduce our charitable donations.

Response: I won’t dispute this claim about human psychology, although I rather doubt that it is an inexorable fact about human nature. Instead I return to the discussion in Chapter 2 concerning Beth and her large donation to the Humane Society. This

¹⁰ The highest is (anonymously) helping someone to help himself.

charitable act was motivated not by any desire to be RMR for being a good person; rather, it was motivated simply by her desire to see fewer non-human animals suffer. We all see things that bother us out in the world—cruelty to animals, global warming, harm to the environment, homelessness, disease and famine, under-funded schools in the inner city, and much much more. Those who are reasonably well-off have the opportunity to mitigate these misfortunes in a small but significant way. Why wouldn't we want to do so? Those who think that charity requires praiseworthiness take far too narrow a view of human self-interest. A sophisticated analysis of our self-interest would reveal that happiness is not correlated with accumulating the most money over the course of our lives. As Aristotle observed, money is a *means*, not an end in itself. The happiest people we know are likely not the wealthiest. They are the people who have achieved the right balance between generosity, philanthropy, pleasure, and fulfillment. If we desire to reduce suffering, and are able to do so, then it is certainly in our (enlightened) self-interest to donate a percentage of our income to charity. Those who are capable of understanding the arguments against free will and RMR are certainly capable of appreciating this fact about their own psychology. Thus, free will skeptics should not be motivated in any way to decrease their charitable donations.

5.6 The Free Will Skeptic as Loving (and Jealous and Resentful) Spouse.

“Lisa, marriage is a wonderful thing. But it's also a constant battle for moral superiority.”
--Marge Simpson

In Chapter Four, I discussed in some detail how romantic love is compatible with free will skepticism. What about the darker side of human relationships? As Marge Simpson so astutely puts it, married life contains frequent battles for moral superiority. At times it is easier to believe that Hitler is not RMR for his role in the Holocaust than it is to believe that a spouse is not RMR for failing to unload the dishwasher. P.F. Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment" sheds light on this rather odd psychological fact. If the reactive attitudes ground our belief in free will, then we should expect the belief to be hardest to give up in our closest adult relationships. And marriage and love affairs are the closest relationships of all.

So how should we adjust our behavior, in light of free will skepticism? A long-term relationship features plenty of quarrels, some of which clearly presuppose that we are responsible for our actions in a way that free will skepticism rules out. What should free will skeptics do when they find themselves in one of these quarrels?

I think that the bickering might very well take a different tone. After all, now Sally the free will skeptic doesn't believe her husband is deserving of blame for leaving his underwear on the bedroom floor. Nevertheless, she wants the situation to change. The give and take, the negotiation, the little spates of bitterness, they all may take on a more pragmatic quality. The griping, she now thinks, can serve to move the relationship to where she wants it to be. (Yes, this sounds cold, clinical, calculating. The "strange dark color" looms. But how romantic is free-will-presupposing bickering anyway?) The bottom line is this: anything that has happened in the past is something for which our loved ones are not deserving of blame. But the future is still open,

epistemically at least, and how we handle our discontents and frustrations will have a causal effect on the way in which we behave in the future. Take-charge-responsibility is important here. Your wife may not have been able, in the strong sense, to refrain from nagging you on Monday, but she is able to refrain from doing it on Friday *if she chooses to do so*. And what you say to her now might very well determine whether or not she does choose to do so.

Of course, this type of pragmatic attitude is what the Crisis Realists fear the most. Do we now have to talk to one another like we would to a dog or a retarded child? Of course not. I must repeat that one hundred percent consistency is not required—especially when a RMR presupposing attitude will achieve a desired end. Often a snide resentful remark in the heat of the moment will be the best way of making one's point. As long as the resentment is not harbored, not *entertained* to use Paul Russell's useful term, the free will skeptic might let it work its magic in certain small situations. It is only the sustained unexpressed marital bitterness, the type you find in John Cheever stories, that is clearly inconsistent with free will skepticism (and many other reasonable ethical positions, I imagine).

The situation becomes more interesting when the arguments are about more than who is doing more work around the house. What if temptation calls and we wonder whether or not we can trust our spouse's fidelity? Suppose that a free will skeptic's wife has a handsome subordinate at work, one who is attractive and charming in every way that the poor skeptic is not. What if he starts to get suspicious...and jealous? How will free will and RMR skepticism affect *this* type of situation?

Let us examine one of the more famous (albeit fictional) committed free will skeptics, Diderot's Jacques the Fatalist, how he handled a similar situation. At the end of the eponymous novel, Jacques has settled down, and married his first love, Denise. But all is not well. The narrator suggests, in the last passage of the novel, that a cuckolding may be on the horizon:

They have tried to convince me that his master and Desglands have fallen in love with Jacques' wife. I don't pretend to know anything about it. But I am quite sure that in the evening he would say to himself: 'If it's written up yonder, Jacques, that you'll be a cuckold, you may do what you will, my boy, you will be a cuckold. If, on the other hand, it is written up yonder that you won't be, they may do all they like, you will never be a cuckold. Sleep, then, my friend, sleep...'
And he would go to sleep.

Jacques, true to his philosophy, is able to view that prospect of his cuckolding with serenity. He is able to sleep soundly, believing that the matter is already decided on way or the other and that there is nothing he can do to change the outcome. Is this how the free will skeptic should regard the prospect of a looming infidelity?

By now we should understand that the answer is no. The free will skeptic knows that he can do *plenty* to change the outcome, as long as the deed is not yet done. Jacques is making the fatalist mistake—the mistake of “ceasing to try to get what he wants because he thinks it is already determined whether he will get it or not, in such a way that he can do nothing about it.”¹¹ (Of course, for Jacques it's not a mistake. He's a fatalist.) But our free will skeptic—call him Jack—is not a fatalist. He knows full well that his deliberations and actions can and probably will be part of the causal

¹¹ Strawson, 1986, p. 101

process that determines whether or not he'll be cuckolded. Even if he thinks that the act will be determined, both possibilities are still *epistemically* open to him. *Jack* doesn't know how the affair will turn out. And since he knows his own actions will influence his wife one way or the other, it seems he can still toss and turn all night worrying about whether he'll be betrayed, wondering what he might do to prevent the betrayal--all the while being perfectly consistent to his belief that there is no such thing as free will. Even if *Jack's* wife would not be RMR for choosing to betray him, even though the act might merely be an event, fully determined by antecedent circumstances—the fact is that from *Jack's* point of view it's an extremely unpleasant event. And he would rather that it did not occur.

So what's the point? Just that the free will skeptic is not obliged to stifle his natural emotions. One can deny free will and still be a jealous husband or wife. So now you might think: is there *any* kind of difference between a free will skeptic and us regular folk? The answer is yes—there's a big difference. To see that, suppose the deed *is* done. *Jack's* wife and the ambitious sweet-talking subordinate are seen leaving the Christmas party together and word gets back to him. Our free will skeptic is now officially a cuckold. At first, no question, he will have reactive attitudes coming out of his ears. Men, if you believe the evolutionary psychologists, are naturally disposed to experiencing violent fits of jealousy when it comes to their wives (to prevent us from wasting valuable resources raising other people's children). No matter what his personal philosophy, *Jack* will be angry, hurt, resentful, seething with hatred, all of it. But after a few days of reflection, what happens? Maybe *Jack* understands the act of

betrayal was not “freely chosen”—in the strong sense. Maybe he sees it as one event determined by series of events that were either partially random or that stretch back indefinitely. He might look at his own actions. He might regret all the arguments he started, or the time he went out with those two actresses and didn’t come home until two in the morning. But he might think: well, these acts were also determined, or at least not self-determined, so there’s no use dwelling on what “I” could or should have done differently. And maybe, as he reflects further, the hatred and resentment start to diminish, and the shame as well. The gloomy bitter feelings don’t disappear entirely, but they lose their edge. Jack is unhappy with the act, the event, this new turn in his life, but maybe the hatred of his wife herself dissolves a bit faster than it would if he truly blamed *her* for the act. He might still want to leave her.¹² But what might have turned into an all-consuming, obsessive hatred, is now a rational rejection of the prospects of his future happiness with his wife.

Objection: This is repulsively cold-blooded! It’s inhuman! I’d rather he smashed furniture, and tracked down this low-life and threw him in front of the F train. Something, anything, would be better than this calculated process of objectively assessing the “prospects of his future happiness.” Jack’s reaction is like Karenin’s, the husband from *Anna Karenina*, a born cuckold, totally humorless, one of the least romantic figures in World literature. No wonder he’s a cuckold! Who could be satisfied living with a man like that?

¹² According to Richard Double “we should replace the question “Was S free in doing *a*?” with “Was *a* reflective of S’s character?” Double, 1990, p. 228

Response: if this is your reaction, then I say again that it's my fault for describing it badly. Recall Jacques' thoughts at the prospect of being cuckolded. It's certainly *unusual* to be sanguine about the prospect, but not cold-blooded. Jacques himself is one of the liveliest, warmest, funniest characters in literature. And in fact, that's the real problem with Karenin—not that he doesn't blame Anna for her infidelity, but that he has absolutely no sense of humor. Jack, once the furniture was smashed and he got around to reflection, would likely see the irony, the absurdity, of his situation. Whatever humor there is to derive is going to come out sooner to someone not obsessed with blaming everyone and himself for what happened.

You might still say that there's something not right about his reaction. But not right in what sense? After all, if the argument in Chapter One is correct, his wife's act was not freely chosen—and blame, resentment, and bitter remorse are inappropriate attitudes to take. (Although grief and sorrow would remain appropriate.) Why shouldn't our attitudes match our beliefs about the world? The fact is, cold-blooded or not, inhuman or not, whether it turns him into Karenin or Gandhi or whomever, Jack's response is in some important sense the appropriate response based on a quite plausible view of the world. If the response turns to have some positive or beneficial effect on Jack, that's icing on the cake.

A personal note. Being known as a free will denier has its drawbacks and one of them is being constantly asked: "What does your wife think of your position?" (Or as Susan Wolf asked my wife at a party: "what's a nice girl like you doing with a man with views like his?") The answer is that my views don't bother her at all. In fact, she

agrees with them—although she would never dream of devoting her life to sorting them out. And I would stack up our married life, with its romance, passion, adventure, excitement, bickering, fights, all of it, against that of any ‘free will and immortal soul’ embracing couple who give the “freely given” gift of love, whatever that might mean. Perhaps this is the best evidence I can present against the Crisis Realists. My situation is actual, not hypothetical. And if something is actual, then it’s possible. Of course, you would have to take my word that (1) that I genuinely love my wife, and (2) that when it comes to my marriage, I’m able to be consistent with my denial of free will. But the bottom line is this: if you can find a person you enjoy being with for years and years, who share interests, laughs, adventures—you are about as lucky as you can get, and the luck, and the experience, has nothing to do with whether or not either of you are morally responsible for being who you are.¹³

5.7 The Free Will Skeptic as Parent.

Almost as frequent as the “how does your wife feel about this” question is this one: “how are you going to raise your children?” The worry is that the concepts of blame, praise, and responsibility are essential to bringing up a happy, successful, moral child. If you deny the foundation of these concepts, and the child knows this, then the child’s upbringing will be impaired. As with the case of marriage, the concern is not entirely groundless, but reports of widespread delinquency would be greatly exaggerated. Indeed, it is worth noting first that child-raising serves as a good

¹³ These remarks, suitably revised, can apply to any type of romantic relationship and to close friendships as well.

example of the distinction between the *pragmatic value* of blame and praise, and the actual *deserving* of them.

Here's an example. When I was eight, one of my Mom's liberal friends—there were hundreds of them—gave me fifteen T-Shirts and told me I should sell them. On the front of shirts were the words: “**Three Miles the Limit.**” On the back: **No Nukes.** (The reference was to the disaster at Three Mile Island.) I can't say I understood the political mission, but I was extremely excited by the prospect of becoming a salesman. So I called my friend and together we set out into the neighborhood on a door-to-door campaign to unload the T-shirts. Both of us thought that our parents would be proud of our entrepreneurial spirit, and so we didn't think it necessary to inform them of our plans.

Now I did not live in a dangerous neighborhood exactly. But it was not the sort of neighborhood in which you wanted your eight-year-old son knocking on doors, being invited in for cookies, and so on. After an hour or two, we split up. The t-shirts were harder to unload than we thought. Meanwhile, our parents became somewhat frantic. Finally, someone in the neighborhood notified them, and we were picked up. As it happened my parents were not nearly as pleased as I expected them to be. In fact, this is the only time I can remember that I was punished corporally—a slap in the face from my father, and a spanking from my mother.

Now think about this from my parents' point of view. Did they really think I was *deserving* of blame and punishment for what I did. I can't imagine so. How was I supposed to know that there are creeps and perverts out in the world, and that eight-

year-olds shouldn't be actively seeking *them* out? My intentions were good. All I wanted to do was sell T-Shirts. And yet in my whole childhood, which like most childhoods featured some bad, mean, intentionally disrespectful behavior, this was the one time I was physically punished. Why? Because they wanted to make absolutely sure I never did anything like that again. The punishment was harsh not because I deserved it, but to deter me from similar behavior in the future. And in this sense the punishment and blame were utterly justified. I needed to be deterred from that kind of behavior. Who knows what would have happened if I had knocked on the wrong door?

A lot of parenting is like this, it seems to me. We praise toddlers when they share a toy in order to reinforce that behavior, not because we think they are deserving of praise. When we're proud of our two-year-olds—for their appearance, temperament, athletic ability, or intelligence—it comes not from thinking that they are morally responsible for having these traits, but simply from loving them and being appreciative of who they are. And when we are ashamed of them, we believe, if anything, that it is *us*, not them, who are deserving of blame. Is *all* blame and praise towards children like this? Of course not. I imagine we do start to attribute real (robust) moral responsibility to our children, as they grow older. My point is only this: raising children shows us how the concepts of praise and blame—suitably and radically revised—would still have a place in a free will skeptic's household.

Let us turn, however, to more difficult cases. There is range of ages that does seem to be a little problematic--somewhere between adolescence and the early teenage years. Before this period, in general, we don't treat our children as RMR anyway—our

punishments are pragmatic in intent and our rewards are either pragmatic or simple expressions of love. Moreover, if you tell an eight year old that he is not robustly morally responsible for his behavior, he will likely have no idea what you're talking about. After this period, when the children go off to college or work, we (hopefully) start to treat them like adults. And so all the considerations discussed in the above section—concerning close adult relationships—would apply. But during adolescence and the early teenage years, the child is able to comprehend (and perhaps exploit) the implications of free will and RMR skepticism, without having the cognitive capacity to understand the position in all of its complexity. (“Well if I don't have free will then why are you grounding me?”)

It may also be difficult for a child of thirteen or fourteen not to make the fatalist mistake. It may be difficult for them, upon learning of their parents' skepticism, to understand the ways in which they *are* free and responsible: to understand that they can shape their characters and that they have take-charge-responsibility. No matter what we tell them, they may not believe that it is in their enlightened self-interest to read great but difficult books, to be generous, to keep promises, and to follow the basic rules of society. It may be difficult for them to understand that should do all of these things even if they will not *deserve* praise for doing them, and blame for not doing them.

Consider an example. Lily, a single mother and free will skeptic, has a 13 year old son, Max, who has been caught shoplifting from his grandfather's store. Lily is appalled by this act for many reasons. First, it is not the first time he has been caught for shoplifting—recently he was caught stealing a pair of sunglasses from the Sunglass

Hut at the local mall. But even worse, this act showed a deep lack of respect for his grandfather—a man who helped raise and provide for him when his father could not. It is quite plausible that Lily's first reaction will be one that fails to incorporate her skepticism about free will and RMR. She'll be furious, bitter, resentful. She'll wonder how *he*, Max, could have done such a thing. How he could have *chosen* to do such a thing, perhaps even how he could have *freely chosen* to have done such a thing. But after a day or two she will understand that Max, like everyone else, is not RMR for his behavior. It is deeply disappointing that Max would steal from his grandfather, but in the end, she cannot believe that he deserves blame for this act. The important thing is to make sure that similar acts do not occur again in the future. More importantly, she will want Max to become the type of person who would never choose to steal from anyone, never mind his own grandfather. How should she go about helping Max become this type of person?

It is arguable that one way *not* to go about it is to tell Max that everything in the end comes down to luck, that he is not responsible for his behavior. Max (hopefully) feels some degree of guilt, but lacks the capacity to understand which aspect of the guilt is rational and which is not.¹⁴ If Lily tells Max that he is not RMR for the theft, the guilt may well be diminished. And the feeling of guilt should not be diminished, not if Lily wants to discourage Max from performing similar acts in the future. Lily wants Max to remember how badly he feels, independent of any punishment he gets. This memory will motivate him to refrain from stealing again in the future. Furthermore,

¹⁴ See the discussion of guilt in Chapter Four.

Lily likely wants to dish out a fairly severe punishment, and again, this punishment will work more effectively if Max—who is thirteen—feels that it is deserved in the strongest sense. The bottom line is that maintaining the illusion of RMR might be the most effective means of achieving the end that Lily desires: helping Max to become a better person.

Smilansky (2000) uses considerations like these to argue that we should maintain the illusion of free will in *all* cases. But I do not see how this follows. Even if it is true that we should not emphasize our free will skepticism to our teenage children, it would not follow that we should abandon this skepticism in the rest of our relationships, and in our general view of the world. The situation is rather analogous to the question of when an atheist should reveal his (lack of) belief to his son or daughter. Consider a parent, Ben, who does not believe in any kind of personal (or even impersonal) deity but who values many of the rituals in the Jewish tradition. If he tells his daughter too early about his utter lack of belief, she might rightly wonder why she is obliged to go to Temple on the high holidays and pray to nobody. She might wonder why, at the Passover Seder, they repeat stories about a God, who does not exist, parting the red sea, an event that never occurred. She might not yet be able to appreciate the value of a tradition without actual belief. Taking her belief away, then, would remove all the value from the tradition.

Of course, once she turns sixteen or so Ben can explain everything to her, and she will likely understand. But before then, it might not be wise to divulge his personal atheism. Indeed, let us assume that it is not. Does this mean that Ben should embrace

the theistic worldview entirely? Should he conduct his affairs at work, with his wife, when he travels, as though he believed in God simply because he is pretending at certain times with his daughter that He does? Surely not.

I conclude that the most one can say about the implications of free will skepticism on childrearing is this: It may—*may*—not be a good idea to express one's skepticism to an adolescent child. And so in situations where we are with this child, and the question of robust moral responsibility comes up, we might (might!) be better off maintaining the illusion. But even if this is the case, free will skeptics have no reason to abandon free will skepticism as a philosophical position, nor should their decision to maintain the illusion of free will with their adolescent children affect the broader application of this illusion elsewhere.

5.8 The Caveat

There is one area of life in which I agree with Smilansky about maintaining the illusion, and that is in the world of sports. For some reason, abandoning a belief in free will and RMR when I think about baseball, for instance, would take a lot of the fun out of being a fan. I can bring myself to believe that Hitler, McVeigh, and the guy who stole my car are not RMR for their actions and characters, but I have a much harder time doing this for Grady Little.¹⁵ Even more important, when the Yankees fail, when

¹⁵ Little, of course, made the single most idiotic managerial decision in the history of major league baseball when he left a clearly fatigued Pedro Martinez in the game so that the Yankees could tie, and then go on to win, game 7 of the 2003 ALCS.

they are humiliated, I *value* the feeling that they deserve their humiliation. Without that feeling how could Red Sox fans enjoy the rivalry? How could we storm around like madmen when they lose and gloat endlessly when they win? Something about a full appreciation of sports seems to require a suspension of disbelief. We must see the athletes and coaches as RMR for their behavior.

I should not say ‘we’ here, because it’s very possible that others might not need to attribute RMR to sports figures in order to enjoy the competition. Perhaps Tamler Sommers requires this because of the nature of being a Boston sports fan. If you grow up in Boston, you hate the Yankees, and you think that that they deserve every horrible thing that happens to them (with the exception of Thurman Munson’s plane crash). I have an unusually intense and angry relationship with professional sports. A more casual, light-hearted fan might find the sports world one of the easiest places to give up the belief in RMR. Not me.

But now someone might plausibly object: “Ok, for you it’s sports. For me, it’s interpersonal relationships, married life, raising children, and my career. Just as you need the illusion of RMR for sports to be fun (if you call that fun), I need to maintain the illusion in order for these aspects of life to be rich and rewarding. If you allow yourself your lapse, why I can’t allow myself mine?”

The answer, of course, is that you can. If, after deep examination of the problem, you find that you can’t live a fulfilling life without the illusion of RMR in many areas of your experience, then I suppose you ought to follow Smilansky and maintain the illusion. This would not make Smilansky right in general, about

everyone, but it would make him right about you. The problem is that most people assume that the illusion needs to be maintained *without* deep examination or introspection. I have presented the arguments and remarks in this chapter in order to at least raise the possibility that we can live a happy, fulfilling, moral life while at the same time being (mostly) consistent with the view that there is no such thing as free will. I believe that this is true for most people, but perhaps not for everyone. I suspect it is to some degree a matter of temperament. So if, after deep examination, you do not regard the prospects of free will denial as optimistically as I do, then perhaps, you ought to maintain the illusion in those aspects of your life that require it. More precisely, perhaps you ought to lay aside your beliefs about RMR *at those times* and just enjoy the ride—just as I do when watching sports.

But if we do choose to maintain the illusion, we should remember three things:

(1) *It is an illusion.* Alex Rodriguez is not *really* deserving of blame for his actions or his character (hard as that might be to believe). Nor is your ten year old child, your husband, wife, or co-worker who seems intent on maneuvering her way past you on the corporate ladder. In our reflective moments, we have to recognize this, because it is the truth. We often suspend disbelief when watching a film, or reading a detective novel, and we might do so when maintaining the illusion of RMR. But when we come out of the movie theater, the world is still the world. We should never forget that in reality no one is RMR for anything.

(2) *No one else should suffer because we choose to maintain the illusion.* If we choose to set aside free will skepticism in one area of our experience, it is a personal

choice that we are making in order to achieve a certain desired end. It corresponds neither to the truth, nor to how things *ought* to be in any objective sense. If anyone was genuinely harmed by my injection of RMR into sports (and baseball in particular), I would no longer permit myself this indulgence. Similarly, if the illusion of RMR is resulting in retributive acts that harm others unjustly, then we should not allow ourselves to indulge in it—even if we find the illusion attractive.¹⁶

And finally (3) *Our dependence on the illusion of RMR may diminish over time.* As I argue in Chapters Three and Four, the weakening of our commitment to free will and RMR is gradual. It may happen over the course of many years. Therefore we should not assume that just because we seem to require the illusion of RMR in some aspect of life now, we will still require next year at this time. I may find next season that my enjoyment of baseball no longer requires seeing Gary Sheffield as *deserving* of getting hit with a Schilling fastball even though he has been hanging over the plate and whining to the umpire the entire game. And you may find that you do not need to see your spouse as RMR for his or her character or behavior in order for your love to be as deep and passionate as ever. If we are going to consciously, *intentionally* delude ourselves, it seems that we should regularly examine whether or not the illusion is still necessary. If it is not, and if we place some value on having our beliefs and attitudes be as consistent as possible, it follows that we should discard the illusion.

¹⁶ This claim is easy to defend from a utilitarian perspective, but how, one might ask, is it consistent with moral skepticism? The moral skeptic would have to frame this in terms of a hypothetical imperative: ‘if you do not wish to harm people unjustly, then you should not allow the illusion of RMR to cause someone else to suffer. (For if RMR is an illusion, then the suffering will not be deserved.)

5.9 *Concluding Remarks: Life—Indignation Free (almost).*

These are indignant times. Reading newspapers, blogs, talking to friends, co-workers, colleagues, watching television news, it often seems as though we live in a state of perpetual moral outrage. It is harder and harder to avoid hearing things that make us angry, bitter, self-righteous. The pervasiveness of moral outrage is likely a relatively new development for our species. Until quite recently in evolutionary history, the patterns in the social world that would inspire our indignation could not have occurred as frequently. Why? Because when the transgressions occurred, we had to be *present* (or at least in the immediate vicinity.)¹⁷ In prehistoric times, there were no media, no reports about what was going on in other parts of the world. We could only become indignant about something that was occurring in *our* own tribe or group. Now, when someone has a late-term abortion in California, they'll hear about it in Mississippi. If a school board decides to teach creationism in schools in Kansas, they'll hear about it in Massachusetts. Witness the uproar over the recent decision to remove the feeding tube from a woman who had been in a persistent vegetative state for fifteen years. Thousands protested this decision furiously all over America. There was outrage from every corner, on all sides of the issue—everyone convinced of their moral superiority. (Marge Simpson's remark about marriage applies just as well to political debate.) Nothing remotely like this could have occurred before the information age.

The irony is: in a world without robust moral responsibility, indignation is almost entirely irrational. It doesn't matter if you're a conservative outraged at the

¹⁷ And, as noted in Chapter 3, these predispositions were calibrated to serve long-term reproductive goals.

prospect of gay marriage, or a liberal outraged by the ban of it, the resentment and bitterness we feel towards are opponents makes little sense. The free will skeptic will likely have the disposition to become indignant—it is a powerful psychological drive, after all. But he will also work to soften its impact on his psyche. When he notices the high-pitched semi-whine of indignation creeping into his voice, he will take a deep breath and stop. After all, Dick Cheney no more deserves blame for bringing us to war under false pretenses than Howard Dean deserves praise for opposing the war. The free will skeptic will of course vote for and finance candidates who support policies he favors. But there will be no hatred, no resentment for candidates who oppose those policies. A liberal free will skeptic would believe that it is simply a matter of bad luck that Tom DeLay is the type of person he is (bad luck for him, bad luck for the country). And the conservative free will skeptic would think the same about Hillary Clinton and Michael Moore. Once we reflect that *all people*, including those who hold abhorrent political views, are not morally responsible for being who they are, we can rid ourselves of the high-toned self-righteousness that poisons most political discussions. And then we can work productively to convince people that our own views are more plausible.

Will we be successful at banishing the soul-rotting anger and indignation at all times? Of course not. But over time, the free will and RMR skeptic will acquire a view of life that is compassionate, pragmatic, cheerful, and, that (as Einstein says) gives humor its due. Above all, free will skeptics should never lose their sense of humor.