Is Free Will an Illusion?
Causality and the Philosophical Background to a Thomistic Psychology of Choice

O livre-arbítrio é uma ilusão?
Causalidade e o contexto filosófico de uma Psicologia Tomista da escolha

Joshua P. Hochschild[1]

I. Introduction: conflated questions

Modern treatments of free will typically take for granted the problem of how to reconcile free will with natural forces, especially how to reconcile free will with deterministic physical causality. In classical and medieval philosophical treatments of free will took we usually find that the problem taken for granted is somewhat different, prompted not by natural but by supernatural or divine forces: how to reconcile free will with fate, Providence or divine omniscience. As a result, classical and medieval "solutions" to "the problem of free will" can seem irrelevant to modern scientific inquiry, for instance by assuming that in some sense even "free" actions are somehow necessitated by a divine will.

The goal of this paper is to show how classical and medieval approaches can be relevant to the modern problem, and on strictly philosophical (and not religious or theological) terms. First, I need to explore the differences between the modern perspective and the classical and medieval perspective, to further unsettle the notion that there is such a thing as *the* problem of free will. It is sometimes suggested that "free will is an illusion," but as my opening paragraph suggests, in a sense the "*the problem*" of free will is itself the illusion. Yes, free will is a contentious issue. But a philosophical topic may be contentious because there is a clear, precise question with distinct, apparently reasonable, but incompatible available answers; *or* it may be contentious because there is only a vague and imprecise question, or perhaps a confused set of related and intertwined questions, which ought to be clarified and disentangled before one even dares to evaluate answers. I want to show that free will is the latter sort of contentious topic; there are in fact various kinds of questions that have been asked historically about the will and its freedom, and different sets of questions that make sense against different sets of assumptions.

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[1] B.A. in Philosophy, Yale University (1994), Ph.D. in Philosophy, University of Notre Dame (2001), Professor of Philosophy at Mount St. Mary's University (Emmitsburg, USA) and Director of its Philosophy, Politics and Economics program. This essay is edited and abridged from a lecture delivered for campus chapters of the Thomistic Institute at George Washington University (September 26, 2024), Saint Vincent College (February 6, 2024), North Carolina State University (January 27, 2022) and Auburn University (February 24, 2021). It was also presented at the 3rd Aristotelian-Thomistic Congress of Psychology (may, 2025) with adaptations, and is now being published in this journal with the permission of the author.

In the first part of this article, then, I will try to characterize what I think is the paradigmatic modern question of free will, and explore how this question has its roots in a certain conception of nature and causality. Celebrity atheist Sam Harris has argued that the idea of free will is "simply impossible to map onto reality," and I will allow that in a certain sense he is right: for Harris, and others who share his conception of causality, it *is* impossible to conceive of free will, except as an illusion—a phenomenological fiction. The modern conception of causality is simplest to grasp in Harris's materialist version, although we will see that it is not limited to his extreme materialist perspective so much as it is indebted to particular conceptions both of reason and of the operations of the cosmos, conceptions *which actually preclude the asking of the questions* classical and medieval thinkers were asking, and so preclude an appreciation of the Aristotelian/Thomistic philosophical response to those questions.

So, in the latter two sections of this article, I will explore the alternative, classical-medieval conception, in which a very different set of questions about free will were asked and answered. Reflecting on an alternative conception of causality and what it means for a rational agent to "determine" action, it will explore the relation between a philosophical conception of free will and a philosophical conception of God that arises from, and helps to make intelligible, classical and medieval conceptions of causality and freedom.

Is free will is an illusion? This question is not only a modern question, it also arose within the classical philosophical framework. But when it did arise it was connected to a set of other questions and a range of possible solutions that are hidden from us in the modern conceptual framework. Recovering the older framework—the basis of Thomas Aquinas's handling of freedom—thus not only makes Thomistic questions and ideas intelligible to us, but also shows how they help to provide still-viable philosophical alternatives to modern materialist conceptions of human agency and freedom.

II. Modern problem(s) of free will

Let us take seriously Sam Harris's assertion that it is impossible to conceive of free will. Here is some more context for that assertion:

> …the idea that we, as conscious beings, are deeply responsible for the character of our mental lives and subsequent behavior is simply impossible to map onto reality. Consider what it would take to actually have free will. You would need to be aware of all the factors that determine your thoughts and actions, and you would need to have complete control over those factors. But there is a paradox here that vitiates the very notion of freedom—for what would influence the influences? More influences? None of these adventitious mental states are the real you. You are not controlling the storm, and you are not lost in it. You are the storm.[2]

So why, according to Harris, is free will "impossible to map onto reality?" For him, it seems, free will would imply that we would *absolutely and wholly control* our thoughts and actions, not just enough to nudge them in one direction nor another (like a driver steering a car) but to be entirely responsible for them from beginning to end—as if to control the car one would have to also have built it, conjured the fuel, and generated

[2] From Chapter 1, "The Unconscious Origins of the Will," in Sam Harris, *Free Will* (Free Press, 2012).

the road conditions. How far back must one go? Must one also have made the laws of physics? It is obvious that we have no such total, comprehensive control—over our cars, or over our own actions—which is why Harris thinks free will is impossible.

But why would one think that free will requires such total control? It is an odd assumption to make, but the key to Harris's perspective seems to be in his summary of philosophical anthropology: *you are the storm*. That is, you are a collection of swirling physical particles, with nothing in control, but perhaps generating the illusion of integrity and coherence—like a tornado.

Harris's perspective, in other words, is reductionist and materialistic, because he assumes that physical science offers a full account of what is real. If basic physical laws govern the only things that are really real, then everything else not explained in terms of those physical laws can be explained away as a fiction, an illusion, a mere "appearance." (Although an appearance *to whom,* one is tempted to ask.)

For Harris, the question of free will is essentially: Is free will compatible with what we know by way of *physical science*? I accept this as the real, not always articulated question behind the more conspicuous modern question of whether we have free will. But to ask *whether free will is compatible with what we know through physical science* depends on a *further* question: *What do we really know about the world through physical science?* And *this* question itself can actually be taken in two ways.

First, it could mean, "What are the latest findings in physical science?" In other words, what specific accounts do the physical sciences offer about certain behaviors of physical bodies in the physical world? Here, obviously, much depends on the state of the physical sciences at a given time, and this is often the kind of attention on which the question of free will seems to hinge.

But we also have to ask a second version of the question: "*what do we know about the world through physical science*?", a more general, philosophical question, namely: "How much, in principle, does physical science capture about the nature of things in the physical world?" In other words, at whatever state of progress we find particular physical sciences, how should we understand the relationship between physical science and a full account of our environment, and especially of other human beings and ourselves, of human nature, its origin, activities, and ends?

Materialists will often simply *assume* an answer to this question, or else deny that it even is a question and so not raise it. Materialism simply takes it for granted that reality is purely physical, and that our only access to it is physical science, and so physical science, in principle, if not yet in fact, is alone what can offer an account of the natures of things.

But of course, materialists ask the first version of the question, namely, what is physical science currently telling us about reality, and so we get into conversations about Newtonian physics, quantum mechanics, neuroscience, and even artificial intelligence. In this context, the question, "is free will compatible with physical science" leads to discussion of whether given findings of one or another scientific specialty supply a context or space for imagining a free act, that is, an act that cannot be accounted for or "determined" by other scientific specialties in terms of other physical causes. So, from a materialist perspective, we get discussions about whether freedom could be an uncaused or random gap provided by quantum indeterminacy, or an emergent property, like software running on hardware; or we see inquiries about whether freedom could be

located in a particular part of the brain (the pineal gland, or the anterior cingulate cortex) or a particular pattern or kind of neuron activity (like the *Bereitschaftspotential, the unconscious "readiness potential" in neuronal activity that takes place right before a decision).*

These are interesting discussions, and we should be happy for the progress of science that allows them to even be formulated. But to someone who actually cares about *free will* they might sound like arguments between blind people over whether the line between blue and purple should start at wavelength 449 or 450 nanometers. In other words, describing some *material conditions for the exercise of free will* does not seem to make the *exercise of free will itself* at all recognizable as the phenomenon those conditions are supposed to describe.

What we all really want to know is what insight, if any, physical science can provide on the human experience (which includes colors and choices, and not simply wavelengths and neurons). Put another way, and very *personally*: where are *you* in this supposedly "scientific" analysis? Harris is bravely frank in his reductionist materialism. *You* aren't *anywhere*, you are a swirling collection of particles, a *storm*. Harris's vision is unapologetically, but also impossibly, *im*personal. He is not explaining free will, he is explaining it away; on his account, free will is literally *inconceivable*. (Although again, one is tempted to ask, *by whom*?)

Not every denial of free will is quite so cold. Indeed, historically there have been quite a range of metaphors for human beings in a deterministic world, and *the storm* is on the bleaker side of things. Slightly more intriguing, for instance, is the idea that you are a piece of hardware running some software, a collection of spinning electrons, physical but conceived in a different mode, less reductionist. This even has a version of hope for immortality, if only we could "upload" our consciousness-software into some other medium, as dreamed of by the likes of Elon Musk or Ray Kurzweil.

There are other famous metaphors for human-beings-imagined-without-free will. Schopenhauer, for instance, compared us to something a little more recognizable; allowing us at least the bodily integrity of a coordinated thing, something coherent and subject to drama, and the *appearance* of narrative purpose. Here he is, in 1818, with a more mechanistic metaphor for human agency:

> The human race… presents itself as puppets that are set in motion by an internal clockwork… I have said that those puppets are not pulled from outside, but that each of them bears in itself the clock work from which its movements result. This is the *will-to-live* manifesting itself as an untiring mechanism, as an irrational impulse, which does not have its sufficient ground or reason in the external world.[3]

Puppets don't act on their own, of course, they are manipulated. And where there is manipulation, there is a manipulator. For Schopenhauer, the human person is not so much an agent as the receiver of a kind of general life-force agency, the "will-to-live," which permeates the whole universe. So we are driven from the inside, by impersonal forces, like an automaton. But there is, in this picture, a God of sorts, an internal,

[3]Arthur Schopenhauer, *World as Will And Representation*, supplement to book 2 (as quoted in Zadie Smith, *Feel Free: Essays* [Penguin Press, 2018], p. 122).

impersonal and irrational will, the source of our life and motion for which we cannot take credit. Hence individual human beings are not really free; we are puppets—puppets of a blind puppet-master.

It is possible to deny free will and yet ascend the great chain of being even higher. Couldn't we imagine that we are not collections of particles (the storm) or complex contraptions (like automata, or plants) but some kind of self-aware, though deceived and pathetic, beast? What if we are not puppets on the end of a string, but dogs on the end of a leash? This is the kind of metaphor that Baron Holbach used (in 1772) to describe how we can *experience* free will without actually being free:

> "But," you will say, "I feel free." This is an illusion, that may be compared to that of the fly in the fable, who, lighting upon the pole of a heavy carriage, applauded himself for directing its course. Man, who thinks himself free, is a fly, who imagines he has power to move the universe, while he is himself unknowingly carried along by it.[4]

Holbach saw that denial of free will did not have to follow a mechanistic view of human nature; we could still be animals, with inclinations, dispositions, relationships. And the lack of freedom does not, for Holbach, deprive us of the possibility of merit: some beasts and machine parts contribute more to the world and others detract and fail. Animals don't have free will, but they can still be admired by other animals. Even mechanistic parts can have "merit":

> What is merit in man? It is a manner of acting, which renders him estimable in the eyes of his fellow-beings. What is virtue? It is a disposition, which inclines us to do good to others. What can there be contemptible in machines, or automatons, capable of producing effects so desirable? Marcus Aurelius was useful to the vast Roman Empire. By what right would a machine despise a machine, whose springs facilitate its action? Good men are springs, which second society in its tendency to happiness; the wicked are ill-formed springs, which disturb the order, progress, and harmony of society. If, for its own utility, society cherishes and rewards the good, it also harasses and destroys the wicked, as useless or hurtful.[5]

So: while the denial of free will is often associated with atheist materialism and mechanistic reductionism—as in the example of Sam Harris—historically the denial of free will is compatible with a more organic understandings of the physical world, and even with a vision of a certain type of God—God, that is, understood as a puppet-master, an impersonal force. Indeed, many philosophers most concerned with *Will*—Friedrich Neitzsche of course, or the more obscure and even more pessimistic Philipp Mainländer—make Will a primal force of the universe. Human beings, as individual agents, are not really free, but at the mercy of this more fundamental and irrational force.

[4] Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach, *Good Sense*, §80 (quoted from an anonymous 1895 English translation of *Le Bon Sens*, published in French in 1772), https://www.ftarchives.net/holbach/good/gs2.htm

[5] *Ibid*, §83.

(We find "Will" capitalized of course, not as the proper name of a divine *person*, but as the reification of a Germanic *abstraction*.)

Thus, while the denial of free will is also often associated with not taking seriously the possibility of moral responsibility, many thinkers who deny free will find a way to "save the phenomenon" of moral seriousness. Schopenhauer is the one who bequeathed philosophy with the phrase, "the meaning of life"[6]: we are not free, but we feel free, and awareness of this can somehow liberate us from certain pains and anxieties, or help us accept our fate. Although details vary, the idea that there is ethical wisdom in making peace with our lack of freedom is a perspective that goes back through Spinoza to ancient atomists. Even Sam Harris is eager to reassure us how humane, how spiritually liberating, it is to see through the free will illusion, and come to terms with our lack of agency.

It is only a minor modification within this account to carve out some space for activity which is not entirely determined: the indifferent, or random. Whether in the modern version of quantum indeterminacy, or in the ancient Epicurean version of a particle swerving unpredictably from its natural path, these gaps in an otherwise determined causal chain do not in fact supply *freedom*, in the sense of an agent's *self-determination*; they simply allow for vacant *interruptions* of predictable causality. They create space for the illusion of freedom.

I am deliberately not going into the specific details because I want to characterize the general conceptual framework within which it comes to make sense to say that free will is an illusion. What makes free will inconceivable, which is to say "incompatible" with an understanding of the physical world, is a certain conception of what can count as a *cause*. In this understanding, something either *doesn't have a cause at all* (it is indifferent, random) or it is *entirely caused by something else* (determined) or it is *self-moving or self-caused*. The idea that an action has *no* cause doesn't make sense; that it causes *itself* might make it free, but seems impossible; that it is caused by *something else* implies that it is not free.

III. Determinations of action: participated causality

It is this framework in which it seems that there is a conflict between determinism and freedom which can only be resolved in favor of determinism. But let us think further about this word, *determine*. Determination simply means specifying the direction something will go, ordering it to its end. To say that something has free will is to say that it determines its own actions, rather than having them determined by something outside of or prior to itself. What we call *determinism* might better be called *hetero-determinism*—actions determined by something other than the acting agent. What this perspective imagines, unsuccessfully, as "freedom" is either *auto-determinism* (actions determined entirely by the acting agent), or *indeterminism* (actions indifferent, not determined or specified *by* anything at all). But auto-determinism seems to violate a basic principle of causality—shared by all scientists from Aristotle to Harris—that things don't cause themselves. And indeterminism is not *freedom*, it is indifference or chance.

[6] On the emergence of the phrase "the meaning of life" in the 19th century, and the philosophical significance of that emergence, see Joshua P. Hochschild, "John Paul II's Gamble with 'the Meaning of Life'," *Studia Gilsoniana* 10.3 (2021): 491-515.

This terminology — hetero- and auto-determinism — is not something that I take from other philosophers, but I discovered some precedent in modern empirical psychology[7], and it has been applied in developmental disability research.[8] This suggests to me that, whatever resources philosophers may bring to the table, on free will philosophers can continue to learn from other scientific disciplines that grapple with helping human beings develop effective agency.

If there is such a thing as free will we need another kind of *determining*. To take my mundane example of driving the car. Is my car's movement *wholly* determined by me? Certainly not; I'm steering, but its power is coming from an engine that I merely nudge and manipulate, and the car itself is dependent on all sorts of prior causes. Is the car's movement *wholly* determined by something other than me? No, *I'm driving*.

Recall Holbach's metaphor of the un-free self: the fly carried along by the carriage. What if we are not like the passive fly, but more like the horse, actually pulling the carriage; or better yet, what if we are more like the carriage driver, directing the carriage, even if its motive force comes from the horse? Perhaps the oldest metaphor for the free will, even before it was called free will, is the chariot driver, as told in Plato's *Phaedrus*: reason (represented by a man) seeks to rein in and direct passionate motive forces in the form of two winged horses.[9]

We need a way to describe something that is crucially involved in shaping, guiding, or directing actions, without exhausting responsibility for those actions. And if this is possible, we also need a way to characterize different ways in which something can be crucially involved in a cooperative causal activity. This would be something between pure hetero- (or other-) determinism and pure auto- (or self-) determinism; and it would have to acknowledge that a chain of causes must lead back, ultimately, to some first, original cause, to a "God" who is the only conceivable, auto-determinate thing. For lack of a better term, what I am suggesting is the concept of *participated theo-determinism.*[10] Let me explain what I mean.

It would be fair to say that any natural object has some share in causing its actions. Fire doesn't make itself, but once it is fire, it is the fire that burns. Stones don't make themselves, but once they exist, it is the stone that has mass, and its mass can be a source of action—falling, pressing, or even staying put by inertia.

Living things, too, clearly have *a share in their own causality*. A plant is not responsible for having generated itself, but once it exists, it has certain functions of growth and nourishment and protection that are activated from its very nature as the plant that it is.

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[7] Andras Angyal, *Foundations for a Science of Personality* (New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1941), p. 33, contrasts an organism's "self-determination" with "external determination," and the author is taken as a source for later "self-determination theory."

[8] Karrie A. Shogren, Michael L. Wehmeyer, Susan B. Palmer, Anjali J. Forber-Pratt, Todd J. Little and Shane Lopez, "Causal Agency Theory: Reconceptualizing a Functional Model of Self-Determination," *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities* 50.3 (September 2015): 251-263.

[9] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a–254e.

[10] John Paul II develops similar language to describe natural law ethics as a philosophical alternative to divine command theory (*heteromy*) and an account of radical individual freedom (*autonomy*), calling it "participated theonomy" (*Veritatis Spendor*, §41). In doing so he is recalling Aquinas's definition of natural law as the rational creature's participation in eternal law (*Summa Theologiae* Ia-IIae, q. 94, a. 2).

Ascending the chain of being, animals do not only have a share in exercising their causal powers, they have a certain mode of *awareness* of that share (animal cognition). The hungry lion sees the gazelle and stalks it, and experiences hunger until sated.

None of this, so far, describes free action: plants don't have free will, animals operate by instinct. But we are at least describing things that are, in some way, acting under their own power: they are not happenstance particle storms or passively dancing puppets. And to the extent that they are not entirely under their own power, they are exercising power that can be traced back to an original, first cause. So in acting, these agents are cooperating with and participating in an original activity from what created them—ultimately, God.

What is it that we human beings add, on top of a share in their own causality, and an animal awareness of the same? We have an additional mode of cognition or awareness, by which we acquire a further level of *personal responsibility for* our actions: we deliberate and decide on particular courses of action, in light of how they can be ordered to ends beyond our sense, imagination, or memory. The lion hunts by instinct, to fill her belly; the farmer plants his field by prudence, to raise food, feed his family, steward the land, leave a posterity—and also to make possible a distinctively human, "leisurely" attention to values that transcend the physical world – worship, or giving glory to God, in classical terms; "self-actualization" in the modern psychological sense of Maslov's hierarchy of needs.

Man is the rational animal, but notice my example of human rationality: not a scholar or puzzle-solver but a practical planner, a tiller of soil capable of judging the best means toward a perceived goal, and of ordering immediately perceived goals toward more remote and ultimate goals. There could be no more basic human functions, nothing of which one could be more aware, than the function of judging and deciding in everyday life—even as an atheist determinist decides how best to persuade people that free will is an illusion, and judges what arguments and metaphors to use to make this seem compelling. Of course, what is excluded from all the common modern metaphors of determinism is not only a will (as some mysterious invisible motive force) but any recognition of *rationality* or *intellectual awareness* as a kind of responsible providence over the activity of the creature.

Once we *do* attend to human rationality, as a power of "self-providence" that sets us apart from other animals, it is an almost immediate and intuitive step to treat this power as a reflection of and participation in a prior or higher cosmic providence over all of creation. Where did our capacity come from, if not from an original perfect form of this capacity, who endowed us with a share of the original? We might call this insight the *imago* Dei, man made in the image of God, but it is not a specifically Biblical or "religious" idea. That rationality as a mysterious, miraculous gift, a spark of his divinity that sets us apart from the rest of physical creation, was acknowledged also by pagan philosophers: Plato and Aristotle and Stoic thinkers regarded the intellect, reason, *Logos*, as "something divine in us."[11]

[11] For instance, see: Plato, *Timaeus*, 90a–c and *Republic*, 589c–590a; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.7 and *De Anima* III.5; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, V.27; Epictetus, *Discourses*, II.8; Seneca, *Letter* XCII.27.

It is not by accident that every determinist metaphor for the human being is something *non-rational*. In modern materialist or deterministic conceptions of reality, it is not so much God that is missing, but a certain conception of what human beings are that may make it possible to conceive of God, as a Provident agent, knowing and willing his creation; likewise, this very conception of "God" in turn makes it easier to entertain the idea of human beings as capable of a kind of "freedom": rather than reductionist metaphors which conceive of human agency in terms of lesser, irrational, purely material things, the very idea of "God" makes it possible to entertain the idea of human beings as very special animals somehow participating in a higher, more intelligible, and more truly free, reality.

IV. Classical questions of free will

Still setting aside the matter of belief in God, and only considering the philosophical possibility of conceiving of God, the very concept of God did not in all ways make it easier for classical or medieval thinkers to defend the possibility of free will. If the modern question of free will is most often the question of whether free will is compatible with the deterministic causes of physical science, a set of more classical questions about free will are raised about the compatibility of free will and the "providence" and omnipotence of a divine being.

For medieval thinkers, some of these problems were intensified by Christian faith, but many classical medieval texts—including, for instance, Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will* and Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*—quite clearly recognize these as problems to be raised within a philosophical framework, and demanding answers on strictly philosophical terms. It was not Scripture or creeds, but Aristotle and the Neoplatonic tradition, that provided the principles and parameters for articulating the possibility of cooperating causes and a hierarchy of powers. In fact, Boethius has been criticized for leaving specifically Christian faith out of his handling of fortune, Providence, and free human action in the Consolation of Philosophy. Likewise, many Christians would be surprised to see that Augustine understood his response to Pelagian conceptions of human freedom as not depending on a specifically Biblical conception of grace but on a neoplatonic conception of shared or cooperating causal powers.[12]

Later, arguing with Pelagius, Augustine was pressed to address questions about the Christian concept of "grace," but even here he insists his responses to doctrinal *theological* objections uphold the central points of the earlier *philosophical* framework from his work on free will: that all goods, greater and lesser, come from an original exemplar of goodness, and since free will is an intermediate good which can be used for

[12] Augustine, *De dono perseverantiae,* 6: "Since it was impossible to bring up the authority of [Holy Scripture] in opposition to [Manichean] perversion… by means of irrefutable argumentation (which I actually accomplished without direct appeal to the truth of any part of [Holy Scripture]) I showed that… there are no grounds at all for their belief that there exists two co-eternal natures, one good, one evil, which co-exist together." (Quoted in Hackstaff, "Translator's Introduction," *On Free Choice of the Will*, Library of the Liberal Arts, 1964, p. xxix.)

good or evil, if it is used for good, that good use, which is a greater good, is only due to that original source, a higher goodness, by receiving and sharing in its power.[13]

In short, for Boethius, Augustine, and many other medieval thinkers, appealing to something "divine" was neither a matter of faith nor an alternative to a natural, scientific conception of causality. In this Aristotelian/Neoplatonist conceptual framework, the relevant notion of causality is not a necessary and sufficient prior material condition productive of an effect, but the source of actuality, a *power communicating being*. The difference with the modern notion of cause means that, among other things, the Aristotelian/Neoplatonic framework allows for distinct, but cooperating, *proximate* and *ultimate* causes—an idea we have seen has been recovered in modern empirical psychology! A physical event cannot be ultimately explained by reference to a chronologically prior physical event. Any event must be explained by reference to its conditions of actualization. The conditions of the being of a good human act include *both* the human will as the genuine, immediate, proximate cause, *and* its ultimate source, the original goodness itself, which must be the remote, ultimate cause of the being of the goodness of the willed act. Some of these thinkers did not know, but they would not have been surprised to find, that "The Philosopher," Aristotle, articulates a notion of the will in just these terms in chapter 2 of Book VIII of the *Eudaimonian Ethics*, describing "the starting-point of change in the soul":

> It is now evident: as it is a god that moves in the whole universe, so it is in the soul; for, in a sense, the divine element in us moves everything; but the starting-point of reason is not reason but something superior. What then could be superior to knowledge and intelligence but a god?[14]

In other words, for Aristotle, the soul is a genuine cause of movement, but not the original source of movement; the soul's power to move the body itself has a source, and insofar as its movement is rational, its source must be rational: the first intelligence that is God. For Aristotle, this "theological" insight is a necessary part of practical philosophy ("the moral science") just insofar as it is grounded in a scientific biology (especially psychology) which in turn must draw on the basic principles of a philosophy of the natural world, an account of the nature of causality.

This is the understanding of causality that prompts, in the classical and medieval context, a rich variety of questions about free will, some of which lose their intelligibility to us if we are preoccupied or fixated on the modern problem of whether free will is compatible with deterministic physics. Are some people more free than others? What causes us to abuse or misdirect our freedom? How is it possible for a misdirected or disordered will to be corrected or improved? Many medieval texts show how seriously these questions were taken on strictly scientific or philosophical terms.[15] Their treatments

[13] Augustine, *Retractions*, I.8.4. (Trans. Mary Inez Bogan, from Saint Augustine, *The Retractions* [The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, vol. 60], Catholic University of America Press, 1968, pp. 35-36.)

[14] Aristotle, *Eudaimonian Ethics*, VIII.2, 1248a 25-28.

[15] In addition to ones already mentioned: Augustine's *Confessions* (VII.9-20) highlights how Platonic philosophy helped Augustine to overcome a simplistic materialism and discern a hierarchy of causes. And Dante's *Divine Comedy* carefully distinguishes reason and faith, with the strictly philosophical perspective

may often be valued for shoring up or articulating the intelligibility of specifically Christian answers to these questions; but the questions themselves, and the terms of their possible solutions, were entirely set by a conceptual framework that precedes and does not need Christian faith, a purely philosophical framework primarily informed by Platonic and Aristotelian notions of causality in "the great chain of being."

V. Conclusion: appreciating Aquinas on free will

This is the conceptual framework for causality inherited by Aquinas, and applied in terms of distinctions from Aristotle's works on the soul and ethics. I have given in this paper almost *none* of Aquinas's technical terminology about freedom, choice, and will. I have not explained the parts of prudence, the structure of the human act, the relation of intellect and will, and other such matters. I have tried instead to sketch the kind of general framework in which these concepts and distinctions and analyses could make sense, because approached from outside that framework, from the perspective of modern assumptions about causality and human nature, Aquinas's specific attention to the will and its freedom is not only unpersuasive, it is unintelligible.

Ideally then this article can serve as preface, to proper scholarly articulations on Aquinas's philosophical account of free will. Let me here only mention a few examples. David Gallagher, in two papers, has drawn valuable attention to the relation of reason and will in Aquinas; he has a paper on the "will as rational appetite" and another on "choice" and "judgment."[16] Gallagher helps explain how, for Aquinas, human freedom only makes sense as a particular kind of operation made possible by the intellect.

A friendly critique of Gallagher's work was provided by Fr. Lawrence Dewan in a paper on "the causes of free choice."[17] Dewan finds it necessary to supplement Gallagher's treatment of freedom with attention to the activity of deliberation, and to the ultimate causal role of God in moving the will.

Another scholar, Stephen Wang, also helpfully responded to Gallagher's work by drawing attention to the limits of reason's role, and the importance of the will in actualizing not only the act but the agent. Wang argues that we can speak of freedom as a means of cooperating with God, a mode of "self-creation."[18]

I mention these works to point interested students in the direction of valuable recent scholarship, but also to highlight that what the best Thomistic philosophers are still arguing about and clarifying the conceptual framework within which to understand cooperating causes, and the practical and theoretical implications of "self-determination" and (what I have called) "participated theo-determinism."

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on free will offered by Virgil (*Purgatorio*, Canto XVIII) explicitly set apart from the distinctively Christian theological perspective on free will offered by Beatrice (*Paradiso*, Canto V).

[16] David Gallagher, Thomas Aquinas on the Will as Rational Appetite, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 29.4 (1991): 559-584, and "Free Choice and Free Judgment in Thomas Aquinas," *Archiv fur Geschichte de Philosophie* 76 (1994): 247-277.

[17] Lawrence Dewan, "St. Thomas and the Causes of Free Choice," *Acta Philosophica* 8.1 (1999): 87-96.

[18] Stephen Wang, "The Indetermination of Reason and the Role of the Will in Aquinas's Account of Human Freedom" *New Blackfriars* 90:1025 (2008): 108-129.

I have argued that the modern problem of free will makes certain assumptions about causality. I have tried to show that the history of the problems of free will reveals an alternative conception of causality which not only raises richer, more interesting philosophical problems, but also makes better sense of the human experience (and makes great literature more accessible as well). So once one is aware of the alternative, classical conception, why would one choose to reject it and accept the modern one?

Is free will an illusion? The only thing that would constrain one to answer yes is a conception of reality according to which causality is never shared or participated in, and according to which reasoning is not a distinct kind of power, with its own causal force, irreducible to mechanical processes. On this conception of reality, the only imaginable metaphors for human agency diminish us to amoral animals, passive puppets, or swirling storms. In this conception, as we have seen, some higher "divine" cause could only be a pervasive power, or an original vital force, some impersonal cosmic necessity, but not a *rational will*, a prudent governor wisely provident over all of creation. Freedom of will depends on intelligibility of action; when action is no longer intelligible as such, as in these mechanistic conceptions of reality, there is indeed no place for free will, for self-determined agency, for rational choice; only for randomness, indeterminacy, the mere illusion of choice.

And yet, the illusion remains, and now I will ask again: an illusion *for whom*? Why are those who insist there is no such thing as free will so eager to tell us it is an *illusion*, to argue for that, to get us to change our minds? Why should we listen to them? They are no doubt telling the truth about their own limited understanding: they cannot conceive of free will. But if you are not so limited, once you find available an alternative conception of reality, according to which free will and so much else can make sense, why would you not choose that superior alternative? Indeed, insofar as the intellect apprehends truth and the will is moved by what is good, why would one not, as a free agent, feel *compelled* to choose it—not passively coerced by an exterior force, but drawn to it by an interior unity of thought and desire, activated and moved as if by some original source and exemplar of the ultimate object of our attention as rational agents?