

NEGLECTED PSYCHOLOGICAL ELEMENTS OF FREE WILL

BRUCE N. WALLER



ABSTRACT: Two essential elements of free will—internal locus of control and confident self-efficacy—have been studied extensively by psychologists but neglected by philosophers. As a result of this neglect, philosophers have worked with a distorted view of free will. Existentialists exaggerate internal locus of control while undercutting self-efficacy; most contemporary philosophers have taken both internal locus of control and self-efficacy for granted, ignoring their importance and the problems generated by their absence. By taking advantage of psychological research on internal locus of control and self-efficacy, this paper develops a richer and more realistic account of the value of free choice and the real threats to free will.

KEYWORDS: autonomy, existentialism, free will, locus of control, need for cognition, responsibility, self-efficacy

WHATEVER ELSE FREE WILL may require, there are two essential psychological components. The first vital element is belief in substantial *control* over one's own life. As Hume noted, those bound in chains are not free: they have little control over their motions, choices, behavior. But exercise of freedom requires more than absence of iron shackles, necessary as that absence may be. Shackles of psychological or economic or social oppression can also bind and many people whose social, religious, and work lives are tightly constricted

exercise little control. But even those who apparently have a wide range of effective choices do not always enjoy real control. Their free will deprivation is not due to chains, or even the less obvious social and economic constraints; rather, they lack the essential belief in the effectiveness of their own choices. Instead of having (what psychologist J. B. Rotter [1979, 1975, 1966] called) an *internal locus of control*, they regard the important events of their lives as controlled externally: by fate or chance, or perhaps by powerful others.

Making "choices" while having no real control is a cruel joke. It's like being given a child's toy steering wheel and told that you may make all the choices you like about how to steer the car—though your choices will have no effect on the route taken. If those are your circumstances, you are not in a position to make free choices or exercise free will. If your choices are really hooked up to the actual steering mechanism, but you believe that all the important choices in your life are under external control, then that is a more subtle but equally powerful impediment to free will. If you cannot make effective choices concerning events in your life, then your "free will" is a sham. And if you believe that control over your life is in the hands of fate, or perhaps dominated by powerful others, in that case also you cannot effectively exercise control. An illu-

sory external controller may destroy free will as effectively as a real one. In fact, the illusory external controller may cause deeper damage than a real controller. I may at least choose to struggle against a real external controller; but my deep belief that all significant events in my life are outside my control will mire me deep in passive acquiescence. (Free will obviously does not require that you have, and believe that you have, total control over every event in your life. If some options are closed off—you fail to win your first choice in jobs or graduate schools or lovers—you may still exercise substantial control over important aspects of your own life, and recognize that you have the power to make things happen.)

In addition to an internal locus of control, free individuals must also feel that they can exercise control *effectively*; that is, free will requires (what Albert Bandura [1977, 1982, 1997] calls) a sense of “self-efficacy.” A strongly self-efficacious individual has a sense of *competence* to engage in behavior; or more broadly, she believes in her ability to successfully carry out a task and achieve a desired result. We are less inclined to attempt projects we perceive as beyond our powers (Bandura 1977). With a weak sense of self-efficacy we give up sooner when confronting difficulties, whereas those with strong self-efficacy beliefs persevere (Bandura and Schunk 1981; Schunk 1981; Weinberg, Gould, Yukelson, and Jackson 1981).

A positive perception of self-efficacy is obviously not the same thing as being genuinely self-efficacious, although they are not unrelated. I may believe that I can solve the logic problems posed to me, and tackle them with confidence and vigor, even if in actual fact I am a logic klutz. After enough failures, I will lose my sense of self-efficacy with regard to logic. On the other hand, it may be that I actually have some facility for solving problems in logic, but believe that my logical abilities are very weak. In that case, my weak sense of self-efficacy may prevent me from exerting the sustained effort required to solve the problems. Indeed, my weak sense of self-efficacy may keep me from even attempting the problems.

Thus the relation between our knowledge of our own self-efficacy and the actual existence of our powers of self-efficacy is rather complex. The epistemic status of self-efficacy is not directly correlated with its metaphysical status; that is, our belief in and knowledge of our powers of self-efficacy are not the same as the actual power of self-efficacy. Obviously I can have strong powers of self-efficacy without reflecting on those powers: Dostoyevsky’s (1961) decisive “man of action” never doubts his own self-efficacy because he is too busy to waste time worrying about such things. But such movers and shakers are hardly deficient in sense of self-efficacy. And as in the example noted earlier, we can imagine a person with considerable mathematical ability whose meager sense of mathematical self-efficacy blocks her from making what would be successful efforts. So sense of self-efficacy is not the same thing as actual self-efficacy. But the importance of *actual* self-efficacy is widely recognized, whereas the importance of the epistemic element (the importance of *believing* we have self-efficacy) is often overlooked. The capacity to “make things happen” is an obvious element of freedom. As Dennett states, “We want, perhaps more than anything else in life, to ‘make a difference’” (1984, 124). But the need for a *sense* of self-efficacy—as a condition of the ability to make things happen by taking effective action—is more easily ignored. The *sense* of self-efficacy is obviously not the same as self-efficacy itself (I may *believe* I could effectively pilot a 747, but that does not qualify me to take the controls), but it is a necessary condition for its effective exercise (Bandura 1977). Believing that you have money in a Swiss bank account is not the same as having it; but if somehow you should have such an account without knowing it, you could make no use of it. Whether we count Bandura’s sense of self-efficacy as an actual element of freedom, or instead as a necessary condition for the *exercise* of freedom, a sense of self-efficacy remains a vital (and too-often neglected) factor for acting freely.

Internal locus of control and a sense of self-efficacy are no doubt related, but they are nonetheless clearly distinct. One may believe that one

could perform a task quite effectively, but also believe that the opportunity to exert control and perform the task is blocked by others (this is the plight of the third-string quarterback who is confident of his ability to guide the team to victory if only the powerful coaching staff were not conspiring to keep him on the bench). And one may believe that one has total control, but lack any sense that one can effectively exert that control. If I am the only passenger on a 747, and the entire flight crew suddenly falls into a catatonic trance, then I have a very strong sense of complete control over what happens (the plane is in my hands, not the hands of fate). But simultaneously I have a very weak sense of self-efficacy: I have no clue what all the dials mean, what buttons to push and levers to pull, and no confidence whatsoever that I can safely land this enormous airplane.

Internal locus of control and strong perceived self-efficacy are both essential to the effective exercise of free choice,¹ and neglecting the self-efficacy element makes internal locus of control appear a mixed good. For example, some studies indicate that patients who exert control have better therapeutic results, whereas other studies show that strongly internal patients suffer greater stress. But the negative stress effects are not from the internal locus of control; instead, they result when a strong internal locus of control is joined to an inadequate sense of self-efficacy. That is indeed a stress-provoking situation: the task is really up to me and success or failure is under my control, but I lack the ability or knowledge or strength to succeed. It is stressful to realize that you cannot control your own health care, and that your life is in the hands of others, or perhaps in the hands of fate; but it is even more stressful to believe that you lack the knowledge and ability (the self-efficacy) to successfully manage your own health care, and your life or death is in your own incompetent hands.

Obviously internal locus of control and a positive sense of self-efficacy are not the whole story of free will: other elements essential for free will continues to be a vexed issue. The point is only that these are essential elements that are often overlooked by philosophers, and the result is

that many accounts of free will are missing vital elements. These are necessary, not sufficient, elements of genuine free will; but ignoring these essential elements causes significant problems in some contemporary free will accounts.

Exaggerated internal control *without* confident self-efficacy is the fundamental problem in the existentialist account of free will. Existentialists claim that we must “make ourselves” by our own self-defining choices, choices unshaped by history or character or environment. We are totally and absolutely in control of our choices, and bear full moral responsibility for the choices we make and the persons we become (Sartre 1956, 553). But we must choose with no fixed principles (Sartre 1947, 22), no direction, bereft of social support, and—because we are made by our choices, not our environment (Sartre 1956, 436, 440)—without even an environmental history to orient us. We are inescapably in control of these mysterious choices, but we must choose in profound uncertainty and with no confidence: “. . . I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant” (Sartre 1956, 556). That is, we have complete internal control but no self-efficacy, and the healthy, confident, natural process of making free choices becomes a stressful and bewildering ordeal. Under such a sickly model of free will—that maximizes internal locus of control while destroying self-efficacy—it is small wonder that existentialists feel a desire to escape the burden of free will.²

From the richer psychological perspective that recognizes *both* internal locus of control and confident self-efficacy, exercising free will strengthens and energizes rather than enervates. If it is burdensome, that is because the individual lacks the information, skills, and confidence to exercise it effectively. To conclude from such cases that free will is burdensome is like supposing that a bicycle is burdensome because some unfortunate unskilled cyclist carries the bicycle rather than riding.

When people are well-equipped with both internal locus of control and confident self-efficacy

cy, then making free choices and taking control is desirable and invigorating, not a burden to be escaped. In the absence of self-efficacy, attempts to make choices and exercise control are stressful and frustrating, and it is not surprising that many wish to escape such pseudofreedom. But it does not follow that people commonly prefer to avoid the exercise of genuine self-efficacious free will.

This point has important practical implications. Before we conclude that “this patient really does not want control,” we should be sure that it is not a case of “this patient does not want control without sufficient information and support to confidently exercise that control.” Studies reveal that older patients are more reluctant to make their own choices than are younger patients. For example, Woodward and Wallston (1987) studied 116 adults ranging in age from 20 to 99, and found that older adults wanted less control over health care decisions than did younger persons. From such studies it is easy to conclude that many older patients simply do not want free choices, and should not have that burden imposed upon them. However, when a measure of health self-efficacy was factored in (a measure of the degree of confidence in ability to make and control health care decisions), there was much less difference between ages. The initial difference in desire for control was not directly the result of age, but instead stemmed from differences in perceived health self-efficacy: older people felt less competent to make health care decisions. Thus it is not unlikely that what many older people really want is the information and support to effectively and confidently control their own health care decisions. Patients may prefer less control to control without self-efficacy, but their deeper preference is greater effective control. (The importance of the double free will requirement—internal locus of control *and* self-efficacy—has been demonstrated by a number of studies. For examples, see Chambliss and Murray [1979] and Kaplan, Atkins, and Reinsch [1984].)

Existentialists treat the stressful combination of maximum internal locus of control and minimum self-efficacy as if it were the exemplar of free will. The mistake of existentialists is in think-

ing that free will requires the absence of confident self-efficacy. The mistake of most contemporary philosophers is precisely the opposite: self-efficacy functions as a background assumption that hardly merits notice, much less careful examination.

Philosophers are often attracted to their discipline by the appeal of struggling with and perhaps answering questions that have been debated for millennia. Those intrigued by such intimidating questions are unlikely to suffer from inadequate confidence in their own self-efficacy. Confident self-efficacy is the common invisible background of philosophic inquiry. It is always there, like the air we breathe; philosophers take little note of it and devote little concern to the development and exercise of a capacity that seems so readily available.

Thus while existentialists make self-efficacy impossible, most philosophers make self-efficacy too easy and thus underestimate the demands of free will. For example, Daniel Dennett insists that so long as we are not “patzers” at life, then we “gifted ones” possess the full competence required for free and effective choices. Most “threats” to free will are philosophical chimeras fashioned by the overactive imaginations of our philosophical forebears. Dennett is happy to put our minds at ease and our free will concerns to rest, and banish our fears of the Nefarious Neurosurgeon and Hideous Hypnotist and Peremptory Puppeteer and the Cosmic Child Whose Dolls We Are (Dennett 1984, 10), soberly assuring us that they are only philosophical bogeymen. But in exorcising these philosophical phantasms, Dennett ignores a genuine danger to freedom: a serious and somber threat to self-efficacy, but a threat invisible to self-confident and strongly self-efficacious philosophers like Dennett. That threat is a painful reality for patients who are thrust into an alien and frightening atmosphere, where they are issued orders about what to eat and wear and when to sleep and urinate, and where they are overwhelmed by intimidating authorities offering “information” the patients do not understand in a vocabulary they do not recognize. And it is a real threat for workers who are squeezed into repetitive mind-

less assembly line slots, who are encouraged by their country to believe that their painfully uninformed electoral choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee is an adequate exercise of democratic process, and taught by their religion to humbly accept mysteries beyond their puny understanding. In such environments, the confident self-efficacy required for genuine exercise of free will is more likely to wither than flourish.

Dennett is not the only contemporary philosopher to adopt such a cavalier attitude toward the presence of self-efficacy, nor the only philosopher who has failed to consider the debilitating influence of the absence of a sense of effective self-efficacy. Consider Harry G. Frankfurt's philosophically famous example of the "willing addict" (1971). The willing addict is enslaved to his drug addiction, *and* he approves of his addiction and wishes to remain an addict. If he is enslaved to an addiction from which he has no desire to escape, then Frankfurt counts this willing addict as free. "Along similar lines, Gerald Dworkin insists that "the autonomous person can be a tyrant or a slave, a saint or sinner, a rugged individualist or champion of fraternity, a leader or a follower" (1988, 29). But, rather than supporting claims of freedom, such cases reveal the problems that result from ignoring the need for a confident sense of self-efficacy. After all, what is the difference between a willing and an unwilling addict, between a "happy slave" and one who struggles to escape enslavement? The person who struggles to be free of her addiction or slavery is not free, but does at least have a sufficiently strong sense of self-efficacy to continue her struggle for freedom. But when does one become passive, helpless, a "happy slave" or "willing addict"? When belief in the power to make a change has been lost. The happy slave is not one who weighs her options and chooses slavery, but one who gives up hope of escape and embraces slavery because she has lost her belief in her own powers to make things happen. If a sense of confident self-efficacy is regarded as universal—as many contemporary philosophers assume it to be—then acquiescence in addiction or slavery appears to be freely chosen. But a sense of self-efficacy is a *condition* of free choice and free

behavior, and that essential condition can be destroyed. The struggling slave is not free; but the satisfied slave, whose self-efficacy beliefs have been crushed, is even further from freedom. Counting happy slaves and willing addicts as free is the result of failure to recognize the essential role a sense of self-efficacy plays in freedom.

There is a second salient characteristic of philosophers—in addition to a robust sense of self-efficacy—that also blocks philosophic recognition of the mundane problems that undercut free will. If there is one characteristic that philosophers share, it is surely the feature of being (what psychologists call) *chronic cognizers*. Recent psychological research has revealed a "need for cognition" factor. The need for cognition is distinct from cognitive ability, varies among individuals, and is relatively stable (Cacioppo and Petty 1982), and need for cognition motivates both engagement in and enjoyment of effortful cognitive activity (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, and Tighe 1994). *Cognitive misers* have little intrinsic motivation to cogitate carefully, do not enjoy it, and are generally less practiced and less effective. *Chronic cognizers* enjoy thinking, require little external stimulus to engage in cognitive efforts, and think at more length and greater depth.

The characteristic of chronic cognizing might also be considered a special enhancement of our self-efficacy. If I am supremely confident of my ability to think deeply and carefully and find the solution and discover the most promising path, that strengthens my confident self-efficacy. And like self-efficacy, the philosophical omnipresence of chronic cognizing makes it difficult for philosophers to appreciate the difficulties confronting cognitive misers.

Philosophers are well aware of the benefits of cognizing, but sometimes forget that the capacity for deep, careful, chronic cognizing is—like other aspects of self-efficacy—not always in abundant supply. Consider, for example, the confident assertion of Charles Taylor:

The question can always be posed: ought I to re-evaluate my most basic evaluations? . . .

Because this self-resolution is something we do, when we do it, we can be called responsible for ourselves; and because it is within limits always up to us

to do it, even when we don't—indeed, the nature of our deepest evaluations constantly raises the question whether we have them right—we can be called responsible in another sense for ourselves whether we undertake this radical evaluation or not. (1976, 221, 224)

Thus, we may be virtuous or villainous, but the power of scrutinizing ourselves and our values is a power that we always possess (whether we exercise it or not). Daniel Dennett's view is very similar:

I am faced with an important decision to make, and after a certain amount of deliberation, I say to myself: "That's enough, I've considered this matter enough and now I'm going to act," in the full knowledge that I could have considered further. . . . (1978, 297)

Recent psychological studies have looked very closely at when and why people engage in careful cognitive inquiries—and when and why they do not. The capacity to carefully cognize—whether regarding one's own "radical re-evaluation" or something more mundane—is just as much shaped by our environmental history as is fortitude or intelligence or physical strength:

Children who learn, through observation and experience, that they can cope with their problems through reason and verbal influence rather than through physical force or flight should tend to develop higher levels of need for cognition because of the demonstrated import of good problem-solving skills in charting a course through the hazards of life. (Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, and Jarvis 1996, 246)

In short, confident self-efficacy enhanced by careful cognition is a cornerstone of rich autonomous choice making. But it is not helpful to assert that people always can think harder and more confidently. There are real threats to free will from environments that shape cognitive misers and undercut a strong sense of self-efficacy and eviscerate the internal locus of control. Banning the preemptory puppeteer may comfort chronically cognizing philosophers, who are already shaped for effective exercise of free will. But structuring environments that promote genuine free will—and its vital elements of internal locus of control and strong sense of self-efficacy—is a more rigorous task.

Neglecting the importance of both a strong internal locus of control and a confident sense of self-efficacy has consequences that go beyond inadequacies in our account of free will, involving important implications for psychotherapy. A typical effect of childhood abuse is that the child (and later the adult) feels that the abuse is her own fault, and that she is to blame. Judith Herman describes the process:

Self-blame is congruent with the normal forms of thought of early childhood, in which the self is taken as the reference point for all events. It is congruent with the thought processes of traumatized people of all ages, who search for faults in their own behavior in an effort to make sense out of what has happened to them. In the environment of chronic abuse, however, neither time nor experience provide any corrective for this tendency toward self-blame; rather, it is continually reinforced. (1992, 103)³

If a therapist adopts the existentialist perspective in treating a victim of severe child abuse, the result may be profoundly harmful. Existentialists promote a robust sense of internal locus of control (everything you are and do is the result of your own choice and under your own control) while undercutting confident self-efficacy (your choices must be made with no guidelines or directions). But this could only exacerbate the abused person's already exaggerated sense of internal control (the victim typically feels that he or she did something to cause the abuse, often internalizing the abuser's assertion that "you've been asking for it"), while simultaneously increasing the abuse victim's profound feeling of helplessness (the sense of not knowing how to stop the abuse or escape or exercise effective control) and undermining her sense of self-efficacy.

In contrast to the existentialists, therapists who take taking internal locus of control and self-efficacy for granted may not pose severe risks of harm, but they will fail to offer optimum therapy for abuse victims. The most effective therapy for abuse victims concentrates on discovering small and limited powers of self-efficacy, and then reinforcing and strengthening those capacities to overcome the subject's profound lack of confidence in his or her ability to effec-

tively, competently, and intelligently control his or her life, circumstances, and plans. The assumption that we can all just “think further” or “think harder and deeper” or “exercise self-control” ignores the importance of learning those skills and the importance of nurturing them when their development has been stunted.

What applies to victims of abuse applies in many other contexts as well. The person who gives up after one failure may appear to have “exercised free will” and simply chosen not to exert the effort: she has free will, she just makes bad choices. But when we pay closer attention to locus of control and self-efficacy, we understand that her free will is impaired by an inadequate sense of an internal locus of control (she was rewarded when she did nothing, or was in an environment in which her efforts could accomplish nothing, and so failed to develop a connection between her own acts and results); or that her efforts have had unwanted effects, and thus she has no confidence in her own self-efficacy—abusive childhood settings being a particularly harsh example of such constant failure of efforts to escape or find protection or exert control (Briere 1992, 26). Of course she could now succeed if “she really tried,” but unless her earlier efforts occurred in a responsive and supportive environment, then those capacities have not had the opportunity to become strong and durable, and she can no more “freely try” than a prisoner can freely break his shackles.

This is not to suggest that all the philosophical quandaries surrounding free will can be dissolved by psychological inquiry, nor that the debate over free will should become a branch of empirical psychology. Even if internal locus of control and sense of self-efficacy are accepted as important elements of free will, it is obvious that a fully adequate philosophical account of free will requires a great deal more. But neither can philosophical explorations afford to ignore relevant psychological research, especially when psychologists have mapped two essential elements of free will—internal locus of control and self-efficacy—that are so common among contemporary philosophers that they have been all but invisible to philosophical scrutiny. Paying more attention

to those elements we can better understand free will, cease blaming people for failing to exercise powers they lack, and promote environments that foster vital components of genuine free will. It will require serious philosophical inquiry to determine the significance and connections of internal locus of control and a sense of competent self-efficacy in the continuing debate over free will, but that inquiry is not facilitated by benign neglect.

NOTES

1. See Schorr and Rodin (1982, 162–3), Stein, Smith, and Wallston (1984, 112), and Wallston (1991, 252; 1992, 185–94; 1993 283–6) for further discussion of the link between internal locus of control and self-efficacy.

2. Viewing freedom as an existentialist burden encourages “benevolent” authoritarians to lift the heavy burden of autonomy from those judged too weak to shoulder it. For example, John Kultgen writes: “Autonomy is a burden that one ought to carry unless extremely strong needs force him to abandon it” (1995, 125–6). When autonomy is judged a burden, caring physicians relieve patients of that weight. See also Sartre, 1956, Part 1, Chapter 2.

3. See also Kirschner, Kirschner and Rappaport (1993, 60).

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