

15.6 Cans and Can'ts (p. 369)

Voluntary but Unfree

JOHN LOCKE, WAY BACK in 1690, used the example of a person locked into a room to make a point about free will. Suppose that a man, while asleep, is carried into a room, and the door is locked. He wakes up, and finds himself in the company of somebody he wants to see and talk to. He wants to stay there, but he couldn't leave if he wanted to.¹

This example, according to Locke, shows the difference between what is voluntary, and what is free. This man is staying there voluntarily, but he's not free because he couldn't have done otherwise. His will is free, but he isn't. Talking about "free will" lumps these two kinds of freedom together.

A QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT: So which of these two kinds of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility? Are people morally responsible when they do something because they want to do it (i.e., when their action is voluntary)? Or are people morally responsible when they could have done otherwise?

A colleague of mine who thinks that the notion of free will is nonsense explains what he takes to be the silliness of the notion this way: "Suppose I suddenly run out into the hall and down the corridor. You run alongside me and ask me why I'm doing this. I reply, *I don't know*. THAT is free will!"

¹ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 2, Chapter 21, Section 12.