

15.7 Free Will (p. 376)

Fred Schmidlap, This Is Your Life

IT'S QUITE ODD TO think that irrationality or randomness makes for free will, though unpredictability does seem to have something to do with it. Here, then, is a story that involves unpredictability without randomness or irrationality. See if you think that this makes for free will.

Suppose that some super-psychologist has discovered all the laws of human behaviour, and, in addition, knows all the facts about Fred Schmidlap's life so far. Presumably this scientist would be able to predict everything Fred is going to do. Suppose the scientist writes all these predictions down in Fred's "Book of Life," which Fred gets hold of and reads. On page 3954 of the book, covering next Tuesday, the scientist has written, "Fred puts on his green socks in the morning."

Now Fred is really annoyed at the idea that this scientist might be able to know in advance all the intimate details of his life, and he's determined to frustrate this project. Having read that part of his book on Monday, he perversely puts on his pink socks on Tuesday, just to make the book turn out wrong. So it turns out that the book can't predict him after all.

"But wait a minute!" you object. "The psychologist must also know that Fred is perverse and hostile to the project, and will read his Book of Life, and will put on his pink socks just to frustrate its prediction. So these facts must be in the book too. It might get things right after all."

Okay, so suppose the Tuesday entry in the Book says: "We predict that Fred will put on his green socks this morning. But Fred (as noted on page 3702) has read this Book on Monday. Given his perversity and desire to frustrate our project, he puts on his pink socks instead." But if *this* is what the Book says, then Fred would note that the Book predicts, after all, that he will really perversely put on his pink socks. In order to make the Book's real prediction wrong, he will put on his green socks after all. The Book is wrong again.

Given Fred's perversity, and given the fact that he can read the Book in advance, *nothing* the Book predicts about Fred's sock behaviour can turn out true, no matter how good at predicting the scientist is. Under the circumstances, there can't be a correct Book of Life for Fred Schmidlap.¹

Do you think that this confers free will on Fred?

(Note, by the way, that the story does not involve complete unpredictability in all contexts for Fred. There's no problem with the supposition that the psychologist correctly figures out

1 A "book of life" example like this, and its implications, is the subject of Alvin I. Goldman's "Actions, Predictions, and Books of Life," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 5.3 (1968): 135–51.

what colour socks Fred will put on, but keeps it a secret, or writes it down in a book but doesn't let Fred read it. And there's no problem in letting people read their own Book of Life, as long as they're not perverse like Fred is—that is, as long as what's predicted won't cause them, once they have read it, to act differently.)

God Knows What I'll Do

THE MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS USUALLY suppose that God is omniscient. This means “all-knowing” and includes perfect precognition. But these religions also usually hold that people have free will, and there seems to be a problem involved in holding both of these positions at once.

God's omniscience entails that He knows exactly what you're going to do, and what you're going to decide to do, for your entire future life. So, for example, God knows right now that you're going to decide to put on your green socks two weeks from Thursday. But if God knows this right now, in what sense are you *free* to make a decision? Isn't it already established what socks you'll pick then? It doesn't seem fair that He consigns some to heaven and others to hell as reward or punishment for what He knows they're going to do.

SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT: Doubts can be raised whether we really know what we mean when we talk about free will. If we say that someone has free will, does that mean that that person is utterly free from outside influence? Does it mean that that person is unpredictable? Would someone acting utterly randomly have free will?