

Free will a window into own values

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Ethics is concerned with the values people hold and with the manner in which these values are ranked in the individual's mind. For example, some people rate honesty and generosity highly, while others may rate hard work, cheering for a sports hero, or making money, highly.

If you want to know who you are, a good beginning is to consider what values are important to you. Assume you have some free time. What choices would you make? Would you choose to be with other people, to travel, visit with friends, see a movie that will make you laugh, or one that will make you thoughtful and perhaps even sad? Will you choose to eat in fine expensive restaurants or are you content to eat at Tim Horton's and McDonald's?

To be involved in ethics you must first believe that you have the ability to choose. Having the power to choose is also known as *free will* as opposed to *determinism*. The hard core determinist believes that past experience, genetic make-up, natural intelligence, culture, and parental guidance, work so strongly to influence our "choices" that we don't really have the free will that most people think we have. For the determinist, even the "choices" one makes, are determined by factors that are already set in place.

Believers in free will, on the other hand, recognize that many factors influence their choices, and factors such as previous experience, parental guidance, culture, etc., can enhance our free will. These factors are useful in making the best choices and giving us more freedom than if we made random choices not influenced by prior conditions.

Most, but not all religious thinkers, philosophers, and others who think about ethics, believe we have free will, although this age-old debate about free will and determinism has gone on for a long time, and it is likely to remain unsettled.

The reason the question of free will, or not free will, is important to ethics is that without at least some degree of free will we cannot make ethical decisions. Let's consider a case to illustrate this point. Suppose a person is mentally ill or has an extremely low intelligence and kills another person. In most cases, a judge or jury would not convict this low-functioning person of murder. It will likely be decided

that the perpetrator is incapable of making a right decision or choosing in an ethically correct manner.

A second step towards ethical behaviour which comes after the recognition of free will is to reflect in advance upon the likely outcomes of our choices. Some people are better at this than others. For example, those who drive extremely fast, or drink a lot of alcohol, or lose their temper and swear at their boss have not made good choices for usually the results of these actions have bad consequences. On the other hand, an ethical person reflects in advance on the likely consequences of his or her actions.

A third step in approaching ethics is reflection upon one's own values. Ask yourself, Who am I? What motivates me? What do I like and dislike? Do I value friendship, like reading books, choose to overeat, get angry quickly, care about others, and so on. Next, what are the values I admire in others? How many of these admirable qualities do I see in myself?

Beyond these three steps is the difficult one of reflecting upon longstanding ethical values. These enduring values have been discussed, thought about, and written about, by both religious and non-religious thinkers. A few examples are compassion, honesty, justice, and equity, These values require intelligence, foresight, and free will. Aristotle, in pre-Christian times advocated that understanding these values was too difficult for young children. Hence, Aristotle decided that ethical behaviour should be developed through the formation of good habits until children reach the age of reasoning.

So who are you? You are the product of all the things you value, but as an adult you have free will to make good or bad choices and to reflect on the best ethical values. It is up to each of us to use our free will wisely and ethically.