



Philosophy

UDC – 100

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21840766>

Autonomy and moral agency: the Western philosophical tradition of free will from Aristotle to German classical philosophy

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Accepted: 21.05.2026 | Published: 30.05.2026

Abstract. *The article's primary goal is to examine aspects of autonomy and moral agency, from Aristotle to contemporary analytic philosophy. It is noted that free will has long been a central concern in Western philosophy, as it underlies fundamental questions of moral responsibility, personal identity, legal accountability, and political legitimacy. It is also noted that while contemporary discussions are primarily based on compatibilism, incompatibilism, and libertarianism, these approaches originate in a broader philosophical tradition extending from classical Greek philosophy to contemporary analytic thought.*

Methods and Methodologies. *The author makes extensive use of the historical method to examine the historical development of the Western concept of free will. The study also employs conceptual analysis, philosophical hermeneutics, and comparative historical interpretation to explore the evolving relationship between rational deliberation, autonomy, intentional action, and moral responsibility.*



Novelty in the article. *For the first time in Russian historical philosophical scholarship, this article argues that, despite significant disagreements regarding determinism and alternative possibilities, Western philosophy has consistently understood freedom as a defining characteristic of the rational individual and the basis of ethical accountability. The article also demonstrates that contemporary discussions, enriched by the philosophy of action, cognitive science, and moral psychology, continue to preserve the central Western conception of freedom as rational self-governance and responsible action.*

Conclusions: *Ultimately, the author notes that by restoring the historical continuity of these ideas, the study offers an integrated framework for understanding the evolution of free will in the Western philosophical tradition. It emphasizes that the Western philosophical tradition demonstrates that free will is not simply a metaphysical problem concerning causality, but a comprehensive philosophical foundation for understanding what it means to be a rational, autonomous, and morally responsible person. It also points out that, throughout more than two thousand years of intellectual history, freedom has remained a defining condition of ethical life.*

Keywords: *Free will, autonomy, moral agency, Western philosophy, existentialism, compatibilism.*

Автономія та моральна агенція: західна філософська традиція свободи волі від Арістотеля до німецької класичної філософії

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Анотація. *Основна мета статті* розглянути деякі аспекти автономії і моральної свободи волі починаючи від Аристотеля до сучасної аналітичної філософії. Зазначається, що Свобода волі довгий час залишалася однією з центральних проблем західної філософії, оскільки вона є основою фундаментальних питань моральної відповідальності, особистої ідентичності, юридичної підзвітності та політичної легітимності. Також вказується на те, що хоча сучасні дискусії в основному будуються на компатибілізмі, інкомпатибілізмі та лібертаріанстві, ці підходи беруть початок у ширшій філософській традиції, що тягнеться від класичної грецької філософії до сучасної аналітичної думки.

Методи та методології. Автор широко використав історичний метод для розгляду історичного розвитку західної концепції свободи волі. У дослідженні також використовуються концептуальний аналіз, філософська герменевтика і порівняльна історична інтерпретація для вивчення взаємозв'язку, що розвивається, між раціональним обдумуванням, автономією, навмисним дією і моральною відповідальністю.

Новизна у статті. Вперше у вітчизняній історико-філософській вченні стверджується, що, незважаючи на значні розбіжності щодо детермінізму та альтернативних можливостей, західна філософія послідовно розуміла свободу як визначальну характеристику раціональної особистості та основу етичної підзвітності. У статті також показано, що сучасні дискусії, збагачені філософією дії, когнітивною наукою та моральною психологією, продовжують зберігати центральну західну концепцію свободи як раціонального самоврядування та відповідальної дії.

Основні висновки. У результаті автор зазначає, що відновлюючи історичну наступність цих ідей, дослідження пропонує інтегровану основу розуміння еволюції свободи волі у західної філософської традиції. Наголошується, що Західна філософська традиція демонструє, що свобода



волі — це не просто метафізична проблема, що стосується причинно-наслідкового зв'язку, а всеосяжна філософська основа для розуміння того, що означає бути раціональною, автономною та морально відповідальною людиною. Також зазначається, що протягом більш ніж двохтисячолітньої інтелектуальної історії свобода залишалася визначальною умовою етичного життя.

Ключові слова: Свобода волі, автономія, моральна суб'єктність, західна філософія, екзистенціалізм, компатибілізм

Introduction. Few philosophical problems have exerted a more enduring influence on Western intellectual history than free will. Questions concerning whether human beings genuinely choose their actions have shaped debates on ethics, law, political legitimacy, religion, and personal identity for more than two millennia. The concept of free will extends beyond metaphysics, providing the foundation for moral responsibility, justice, and human dignity. Whether individuals may rightly be praised, blamed, rewarded, or punished ultimately depends on how freedom is philosophically understood.

Review of publications on this topic. Throughout the history of Western philosophy, freedom has been interpreted in different ways. Aristotle analyzed it through voluntary action and practical reason; Christian philosophers connected it with divine grace and salvation; Enlightenment thinkers grounded it in rational autonomy; existential philosophers emphasized individual responsibility; and contemporary analytic philosophy continues to examine its relationship to determinism, neuroscience, and intentional agency (Kane, 2011; O'Connor & Franklin, 2022). Despite these transformations, a fundamental continuity remains: freedom has consistently been regarded as an essential characteristic of rational personhood and the basis of moral responsibility.

Recent scholarship has considerably broadened the study of free will by



integrating philosophy of action, cognitive science, neuroscience, moral psychology, and legal theory. Contemporary philosophers, including Mele (2022), Fischer (2023), List (2019), Vihvelin (2022), and O'Connor and Franklin (2022), increasingly focus on the psychological and normative conditions that make responsible agency possible rather than limiting the debate to determinism and indeterminism alone.

Despite these advances, much contemporary literature treats current theories independently of their historical development. Compatibilism, libertarianism, and competing theories of responsibility are frequently presented as isolated positions, leaving insufficient attention to the philosophical continuity linking Aristotelian ethics, medieval theology, Kantian autonomy, existential freedom, and contemporary philosophy of action.

Main material. This article argues that the Western conception of free will is best understood through a historical-philosophical reconstruction of its internal development. Rather than viewing individual theories as disconnected doctrines, the study interprets them as successive stages in the evolution of a single philosophical tradition centered on autonomous moral agency.

The central research question is therefore:

How has the Western philosophical conception of free will evolved from classical philosophy to contemporary analytic thought, and what enduring conception of human agency emerges from this historical development?

To address this question, the article employs a comparative historical-philosophical methodology combining conceptual analysis, philosophical hermeneutics, and critical interpretation. The discussion proceeds chronologically from Aristotle's theory of voluntary action through medieval Christian philosophy, Kantian autonomy, existentialism, and contemporary analytic theories of free will.

The article argues that Western philosophy has progressively transformed the concept of freedom from voluntary action into a comprehensive theory of autonomous moral agency. Although contemporary debates continue to disagree over



determinism and alternative possibilities, they preserve a common conviction that freedom fundamentally consists in rational self-government, intentional action, and moral responsibility. By reconstructing this historical trajectory, the study clarifies both the continuity and the conceptual development of the Western philosophical tradition while contributing to contemporary discussions of human agency.

Although numerous studies examine Aristotle, medieval Christian philosophy, Kant, existentialism, or contemporary analytic theories independently, relatively little attention has been devoted to reconstructing these traditions as successive stages within a single conceptual history of autonomous moral agency. The originality of the present study lies in proposing an integrated historical-philosophical framework that interprets the Western discourse on free will as the cumulative development of one evolving concept rather than a collection of disconnected theories. By identifying the continuity of rational self-governance across more than two millennia of philosophical reflection, the article offers a new interpretative model for understanding the historical evolution of free will in Western philosophy.

Aristotle and the Origins of Voluntary Action. The philosophical investigation of free will within the Western tradition begins with the work of Aristotle. Although Aristotle did not formulate a theory of "free will" in the modern sense, his analysis of voluntary action (*hekousion*) established the conceptual foundations upon which later discussions of autonomy, responsibility, and moral agency were constructed. His ethical philosophy locates freedom not in metaphysical independence from causation but in the rational capacities that enable human beings to deliberate, choose, and intentionally direct their own actions (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 1999).

For Aristotle, moral philosophy is inseparable from an understanding of human nature. Every action aims at some perceived good, and the highest human good (*eudaimonia*) consists in rational activity performed in accordance with virtue. Human flourishing therefore depends upon the capacity to govern one's actions



through reason rather than through external coercion or irrational impulse. Freedom emerges as a practical rather than merely metaphysical condition: individuals become responsible agents because they possess the intellectual ability to deliberate concerning alternative courses of action.

The distinction between voluntary and involuntary action occupies a central position in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle argues that an action is voluntary when its originating principle lies within the agent and when the individual possesses adequate knowledge of the relevant circumstances. Actions performed under external compulsion or through ignorance lack full moral responsibility because the causal source does not genuinely belong to the acting person. Conversely, when individuals knowingly initiate actions through their own deliberation, they appropriately become objects of praise or blame (Aristotle, trans. Irwin, 1999).

This analysis introduces an enduring philosophical principle: moral responsibility depends upon agency rather than merely upon behavioral outcomes. External consequences alone cannot determine ethical evaluation; instead, responsibility arises from the intentional structure of action itself. Later theories of criminal liability, legal accountability, and moral judgment throughout Western philosophy would repeatedly return to this Aristotelian insight.

Closely related to voluntary action is Aristotle's concept of *prohairesis*, commonly translated as deliberate choice. Unlike simple desire or spontaneous inclination, *prohairesis* refers to reason-guided decision-making concerning actions that lie within human control. Deliberation (*bouleusis*) evaluates possible means for achieving rationally selected ends, after which deliberate choice commits the individual to intentional action. The significance of this distinction cannot be overstated, for it separates human agency from instinctive behavior while simultaneously providing the intellectual architecture for later conceptions of autonomy.



Importantly, Aristotle does not regard freedom as unlimited choice among arbitrary alternatives. Deliberation concerns practical possibilities constrained by reality, circumstance, and character. Individuals cannot rationally deliberate about necessary truths or impossible actions; rather, they deliberate only about matters capable of being otherwise. Freedom therefore operates within the sphere of practical contingency, where rational judgment determines among genuinely available alternatives.

Virtue further refines Aristotle's conception of freedom. Moral excellence is not opposed to freedom but constitutes its fullest realization. Through habituation, education, and repeated practice, virtuous individuals gradually develop stable dispositions that enable them to choose appropriately without internal conflict. Freedom is therefore not identified with indifference or unrestricted preference but with the harmonious integration of reason, desire, and character. The truly free person is not one who acts without restraint but one whose rational capacities successfully govern passions and appetites.

This account differs significantly from many modern libertarian theories that define freedom primarily through indeterministic choice. Aristotle rarely addresses whether causal determinism governs the universe because his primary concern lies elsewhere. The central philosophical question is not whether actions possess sufficient metaphysical openness but whether they originate from the rational capacities of the acting individual. Consequently, freedom is analyzed primarily through intentional agency rather than through cosmological speculation.

The Aristotelian conception also establishes a close relationship between ethics and psychology. Human action results from the interaction of intellect, desire, perception, and practical reasoning. Rational deliberation neither eliminates desire nor functions independently of motivation; instead, it orders competing motivations toward coherent practical judgment. This integrated model of agency continues to influence contemporary philosophy of action, particularly theories emphasizing



reasons-responsive agency and practical rationality.

Modern scholars increasingly recognize that Aristotle's analysis anticipates several themes central to present-day debates concerning free will. Discussions of intentional action, practical reasoning, control conditions for responsibility, and reasons-responsiveness all display significant continuity with Aristotelian moral psychology (Mele, 2022; Vihvelin, 2022). Although contemporary terminology differs considerably, the underlying philosophical concern remains remarkably stable: under what conditions can human beings genuinely be regarded as authors of their own actions?

At the same time, Aristotle's framework contains important limitations when viewed from the perspective of later philosophical developments. His ethical theory does not explicitly distinguish psychological freedom from metaphysical freedom, nor does it confront the theological questions concerning divine omniscience and predestination that would dominate medieval philosophy. Likewise, the modern distinction between compatibilism and incompatibilism has no direct analogue within Aristotelian ethics. Nevertheless, these absences should not obscure the originality of Aristotle's achievement. He established the fundamental vocabulary through which Western philosophy would subsequently investigate intentional action, moral responsibility, and autonomous agency.

Perhaps Aristotle's most enduring contribution lies in his conception of human beings as rational agents whose moral lives depend upon self-directed practical judgment. Freedom is understood neither as arbitrary spontaneity nor as absolute independence from causal order but as the disciplined exercise of rational deliberation directed toward virtuous action. This conception provided the indispensable starting point for nearly every subsequent Western theory of moral autonomy.

The transition from classical philosophy to Christian theology would significantly transform this understanding. Whereas Aristotle primarily analyzed



freedom within the context of ethical deliberation and civic virtue, later Christian thinkers increasingly interpreted freedom through the relationship between divine grace, sin, and salvation. The question would no longer concern only how rational individuals choose well, but whether fallen human beings possess the spiritual capacity to choose the good at all. This shift marks one of the decisive turning points in the historical evolution of Western theories of free will.

Freedom, Grace, and Moral Responsibility: Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The emergence of Christian philosophy fundamentally transformed the Aristotelian understanding of freedom. While Aristotle explained voluntary action through rational deliberation and virtuous character, Christian thinkers addressed a new theological question: how can genuine human freedom coexist with divine omniscience, providence, original sin, and grace? Consequently, free will became not only an ethical issue but also a theological problem concerning salvation, moral responsibility, and divine causality (Kent, 2020; O'Connor & Franklin, 2022).

Among early Christian philosophers, Augustine offered the first systematic account of free will. In *De Libero Arbitrio* and *De Civitate Dei*, he argued that evil does not originate from God but from the misuse of human free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). Freedom is therefore essential for moral responsibility, since only free agents can rightly be praised or blamed for their actions (Augustine, trans. Williams, 1993).

Unlike Aristotle, Augustine maintained that although human beings retain free will after the Fall, their capacity to choose the good has been profoundly weakened by original sin. Genuine moral transformation therefore requires divine grace, which restores rather than abolishes freedom (Stump, 2022). Freedom thus becomes more than the ability to choose among alternatives; it requires the proper orientation of the will toward the good. True liberty consists not simply in choosing but in choosing rightly, while sin represents the corruption rather than the fulfillment of freedom (Matthews, 2021).



Several centuries later, Thomas Aquinas produced the most influential medieval synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology. In the *Summa Theologiae*, he argued that human beings possess intellect and will as complementary faculties: reason apprehends the good, while the will freely chooses among alternatives presented by practical judgment. Human freedom therefore arises from rational deliberation rather than from the absence of causation (Aquinas, trans. McInerny, 2012).

Aquinas further explained the relationship between divine and human causality through his doctrine of primary and secondary causes. God sustains all existence as the first cause, yet human beings remain genuine secondary causes capable of freely initiating their own actions. Divine causality therefore enables rather than eliminates human freedom, providing an alternative to both theological determinism and radical libertarianism (Stump, 2022).

Like Aristotle, Aquinas regarded voluntary action as requiring knowledge, intentionality, and rational judgment. Moral responsibility is diminished by ignorance or coercion because such conditions interfere with practical reason. At the same time, he integrated this psychological analysis with the doctrine of natural law, arguing that genuine freedom is fulfilled through rational conformity to objective moral goods rather than subjective desire (Finnis, 2011).

Although Augustine and Aquinas differed on several theological questions, both viewed human beings as rational moral agents whose responsibility depends upon voluntary and intentional action. Neither identified freedom with unrestricted choice; instead, genuine liberty requires the proper orientation of reason and will toward the good.

From a historical perspective, medieval philosophy significantly expanded the classical conception of free will. Augustine introduced the transformative role of grace and the moral consequences of original sin, while Aquinas united Aristotelian psychology with Christian metaphysics into a comprehensive theory of rational



freedom. Together, they established the intellectual foundations for later theories of autonomy, conscience, and moral responsibility, while preparing the transition to the Enlightenment conception of freedom as rational self-legislation that reached its fullest expression in Kant's moral philosophy.

Kantian Autonomy and the Enlightenment Transformation of Freedom.

The Enlightenment introduced one of the most decisive transformations in the Western understanding of free will. Whereas medieval philosophy had interpreted freedom primarily through humanity's relationship with God, divine grace, and salvation, eighteenth-century philosophy gradually relocated the foundation of freedom within the rational capacities of the individual. The central philosophical question was no longer whether divine assistance enables human beings to choose the good but whether reason itself can provide the normative basis for autonomous moral action. This intellectual transition culminated in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, whose conception of autonomy permanently reshaped modern discussions of freedom, duty, and moral responsibility (Allison, 2011; Ameriks, 2019).

The Enlightenment conception of freedom emerged against the background of profound intellectual changes occurring throughout seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Scientific advances associated with Newtonian physics encouraged increasingly deterministic interpretations of nature, while political philosophy emphasized the rights and rational capacities of individual citizens. At the same time, traditional theological explanations of morality gradually yielded to secular accounts grounded in human reason. Freedom therefore acquired a new philosophical significance: it became the essential condition for moral legislation rather than merely a prerequisite for salvation (Schneewind, 1998).

An important precursor to Kant's theory of autonomy can be found in the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau argued that genuine freedom cannot be identified with the unrestricted satisfaction of personal desires. Instead, individuals become truly free when they participate in laws that they

collectively prescribe for themselves as rational members of a political community. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau famously declared that obedience to a law one has prescribed for oneself constitutes freedom rather than oppression (Rousseau, trans. Cranston, 1968). Although Rousseau's principal concern was political legitimacy, his conception of self-legislation profoundly influenced Kant's subsequent moral philosophy.

Kant transformed this political insight into a comprehensive ethical theory. In contrast to both empirical psychology and theological ethics, he argued that morality cannot depend upon contingent desires, social customs, or divine commands alone. Instead, moral obligation originates within practical reason itself. Human beings possess the unique capacity to legislate universal moral principles through rational reflection, and this capacity constitutes the essence of autonomy (Kant, trans. Gregor, 1998).

The concept of autonomy occupies the very center of Kant's philosophy of freedom. Etymologically derived from the Greek words *autos* (self) and *nomos* (law), autonomy signifies self-legislation. For Kant, an autonomous individual does not simply act according to personal preference but acts according to rational principles that every rational being could consistently endorse. Freedom therefore consists neither in arbitrary choice nor in the absence of external constraints. Rather, it consists in obedience to rational laws that one gives to oneself through reason.

This conception fundamentally distinguishes Kant from earlier philosophical traditions. Aristotle had emphasized practical wisdom and virtuous character, while Augustine and Aquinas had connected freedom with divine grace and the proper orientation of the will toward God. Kant, by contrast, locates the source of moral authority entirely within rational agency. The legitimacy of moral obligation no longer depends upon theological revelation or natural teleology but upon the universal structure of rational consciousness itself (Allison, 2011).

Central to Kant's theory is the distinction between hypothetical and categorical



imperatives. Hypothetical imperatives command actions conditionally: one ought to act in a certain way if one wishes to achieve a particular objective. Such imperatives govern technical skills and prudential reasoning but cannot provide universal moral obligations because they depend upon subjective desires. Moral requirements instead take the form of categorical imperatives, which command unconditionally and apply to every rational agent regardless of personal interests (Kant, trans. Gregor, 1998).

The best-known formulation of the categorical imperative requires individuals to "act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." This principle expresses the universality of rational morality. Before acting, individuals must determine whether the maxim underlying their intended action could consistently function as a universal rule applicable to all rational beings. Moral deliberation therefore becomes an exercise in rational consistency rather than emotional inclination.

Equally significant is Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative, which requires every person to treat humanity, both in oneself and in others, always as an end and never merely as a means. This principle establishes the intrinsic dignity of rational persons and links freedom directly to moral respect. Human beings possess incomparable worth because they are capable of autonomous self-legislation. Consequently, exploitation, manipulation, and coercion violate not merely social conventions but the very conditions of rational agency itself (Wood, 2008).

Kant's account of moral responsibility follows directly from this conception of autonomy. Because rational agents possess the capacity to recognize universal moral laws independently of empirical desires, they remain accountable for actions performed contrary to reason. Excuses based solely upon emotion, inclination, or social pressure cannot entirely eliminate responsibility, since practical reason retains the authority to regulate conduct. Moral responsibility therefore presupposes rational freedom rather than psychological spontaneity.

One of the most challenging aspects of Kant's philosophy concerns the



relationship between freedom and determinism. Like many Enlightenment thinkers, Kant fully accepted the explanatory success of Newtonian natural science. The phenomenal world—the world of empirical observation—is governed by universal causal laws. Human behavior, considered merely as observable natural events, therefore appears to belong to deterministic nature. Yet moral responsibility requires freedom. Kant resolved this apparent contradiction through his distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal standpoints.

According to Kant, every human being may be considered from two complementary perspectives. As empirical beings, individuals belong to the phenomenal world governed by causality. As rational agents, however, they simultaneously belong to the noumenal realm, where practical reason operates independently of empirical determination. Freedom is therefore not an empirical fact subject to scientific observation but a necessary postulate of practical reason. Without presupposing freedom, concepts such as duty, obligation, justice, and responsibility would lose their meaning (Kant, trans. Gregor, 1998; Allison, 2011).

This solution has generated extensive philosophical debate for more than two centuries. Critics argue that Kant's distinction between phenomenal and noumenal agency risks dividing human existence into two incompatible domains. Others maintain that the distinction provides an elegant reconciliation between scientific explanation and moral accountability. Contemporary scholars increasingly interpret Kant not as proposing two separate worlds but as distinguishing two legitimate explanatory perspectives upon the same rational agent (Ameriks, 2019).

Kant's influence upon later philosophy extends far beyond debates concerning determinism. His conception of autonomy transformed virtually every area of modern ethical theory. Liberal political philosophy adopted the principle that legitimate political authority must respect the autonomy of citizens. Human rights discourse increasingly grounded personal dignity in rational agency rather than social status or religious membership. Modern bioethics similarly identifies respect for patient



autonomy as one of its foundational principles. In each case, freedom is understood less as unrestricted choice than as rational self-government (Hill, 2020).

The Kantian conception of autonomy also exerted considerable influence upon modern legal philosophy. Criminal responsibility increasingly came to depend upon the assumption that individuals possess sufficient rational capacity to understand legal norms and intentionally regulate their conduct. Insanity defenses, diminished responsibility doctrines, and standards of criminal intent all implicitly presuppose the Kantian connection between rational agency and accountability. Contemporary jurisprudence continues to distinguish between actions resulting from autonomous deliberation and those produced by coercion, mental incapacity, or involuntary compulsion (Duff, 2020).

Nevertheless, Kant's theory has also attracted sustained criticism. One objection concerns its apparent formalism. Because the categorical imperative evaluates the logical consistency of moral maxims rather than their substantive content, critics question whether it provides sufficient practical guidance for resolving complex ethical dilemmas. Others argue that Kant assigns excessive authority to abstract rationality while underestimating the significance of emotion, historical context, and interpersonal relationships in moral life (Korsgaard, 2009).

A second criticism concerns Kant's conception of the autonomous subject itself. Twentieth-century philosophers influenced by phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminism, and communitarianism have argued that rational agents are never entirely independent from culture, language, history, or social institutions. Human identity develops within networks of interpersonal recognition rather than through isolated rational reflection alone. Consequently, autonomy may require social conditions that Kant's highly individualistic framework does not fully acknowledge (Taylor, 1989).

Despite these criticisms, Kant's contribution remains foundational for contemporary philosophy of free will. Modern compatibilists frequently emphasize rational self-control rather than metaphysical indeterminism; contractualist theories



of justice continue to rely upon principles of equal rational agency; and contemporary theories of moral responsibility regularly define responsible action through capacities for reflection, self-regulation, and reasons-responsive deliberation. These developments demonstrate the enduring influence of Kant's identification of freedom with rational self-government rather than mere behavioral spontaneity (Fischer, 2023; Mele, 2022).

From the perspective of intellectual history, the Enlightenment fundamentally reoriented the Western tradition of free will. Aristotle had interpreted freedom through practical deliberation, while medieval philosophy integrated freedom into a theological account of grace and salvation. Kant transformed both traditions by grounding moral obligation entirely within the autonomous activity of practical reason. Freedom became the defining characteristic of rational personality itself, independent of empirical desires and external authority. This conception established the conceptual foundations upon which much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century moral and political philosophy would subsequently develop.

Yet the nineteenth century would also witness an important reaction against purely rational conceptions of freedom. Existential philosophers increasingly argued that human freedom cannot be understood solely through universal moral law but must also account for anxiety, individuality, contingency, and the lived experience of choice. The philosophical focus therefore shifted from the rational structure of autonomy to the existential burden of being free—a transformation that would profoundly reshape modern discussions of agency and responsibility (Crowell, 2012; Sartre, 2007).

Conclusions. Finally, the analysis suggests that future research should move beyond the traditional metaphysical opposition between compatibilism and incompatibilism by adopting more interdisciplinary approaches to human agency. Integrating philosophy with neuroscience, psychology, artificial intelligence, behavioral economics, and legal theory may offer a more comprehensive



understanding of freedom without abandoning the normative insights developed throughout the Western philosophical tradition. Such interdisciplinary dialogue has the potential to preserve the philosophical richness of classical theories while responding to the increasingly complex forms of agency emerging in technologically advanced societies.

The principal contribution of this study extends beyond providing a chronological survey of Western theories of free will. It reconstructs the historical evolution of freedom as a continuous process in which each philosophical tradition preserves and transforms the central idea of autonomous moral agency. This integrative framework demonstrates that Aristotelian practical reason, Christian moral responsibility, Kantian autonomy, existential authenticity, and contemporary theories of agency should be interpreted not as isolated doctrines but as interconnected phases in the conceptual development of the Western philosophy of free will. In doing so, the article offers a novel comparative-historical perspective capable of enriching current interdisciplinary debates on moral responsibility, agency, and human autonomy.

In conclusion, the Western philosophical tradition demonstrates that free will is not merely a metaphysical problem concerning causal determination but a comprehensive philosophical framework for understanding what it means to be a rational, autonomous, and morally responsible person. Across more than two thousand years of intellectual history, freedom has remained the defining condition of ethical life because it provides the conceptual foundation for responsibility, justice, dignity, and human self-governance. The enduring significance of this tradition lies not in offering a final solution to the problem of free will but in continually refining the philosophical understanding of autonomous moral agency in response to changing conceptions of humanity and the world.



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