

# Free Will?

by [G. Murphy Donovan](#) (August 2025)



Pensive Woman (Charles James McCall)

*Of course I believe in free will. Do I have a choice?*  
—Isaac Bashevis Singer

**Agency, or the lack of it**, has been trending at *New English Review* in recent months with at least three fine contributions on free will in the past two months from Armando Simon, Carl Nelson, and Andy Thomas respectively, each coming down on various sides of the argument.

So I thought I would get my oar in too.

Free will is a fundamental axiom of most religious traditions, ethical codes, or even legal systems in the West. For Catholics, the drill begins early with the ritual of “Confirmation,” a sacrament that holds the age of reason and responsibility for children begins at puberty, at which point a child is expected to know the difference between good and bad behavior in particular, good and evil in general.

It’s not really clear that kids think much about sin, the law, agency, or choice at that age; yet the idea is to give conscience and soul searching a head start. Surely it’s no accident that the Catholic age of reason coincides with sexual maturity where the consequences of bad choices, especially for girls, can be life altering.

Confirmation is followed by admonitions to examine conscience on a periodic basis and confess any failures to pastors in ritualized “confessions” where sins are acknowledged and forgiven. Again it’s not clear that tweens are really guilty of anything serious at that age either, but the ritual’s objective is to cultivate conscience, reflection, and a sense of personal/civic accountability.

As an erstwhile Catholic, whilst reflecting on these matters, it occurred to me that Artificial Intelligence might have an interesting take on free will, given AI’s capacity to review,

analyze, and digest the history of philosophical speculations.

I asked GROK AI to give me a short summary of the arguments for and against free will.

Here's what she wrote:

*The concept of free will is heavily debated. From a deterministic perspective, everything in the universe—including human thoughts and actions—follows from prior causes, suggesting our choices are ultimately predetermined by physical processes.*

*However, compatibilists argue that free will exists within constraints; we can act according to our desires and reasoning, even if those are shaped by prior events. Quantum mechanics introduces randomness at a fundamental level, but it's unclear if this randomness translates to meaningful free will or just adds unpredictability.*

*Arguments for Free Will:*

- **Moral Responsibility:** Free will is essential for holding people accountable for their actions. Without it, punishing or rewarding behavior loses justification, as individuals wouldn't truly choose their actions.
- **Subjective Experience:** We feel like we make choices freely, from small decisions to life-changing ones. This intuitive sense of agency supports the idea that free will exists.
- **Practical Necessity:** Societies function on the assumption of free will. Legal systems, education, and personal growth rely on the belief that individuals can choose to act differently.

*Arguments Against Free Will:*

- **Causal Determinism:** *The universe operates under physical laws, where every event, including human decisions, is determined by prior causes. If our brains follow these laws, free will is an illusion.*
- **Neurological Evidence:** *Brain studies show decisions are often initiated before conscious awareness, suggesting our choices are driven by unconscious processes, not free will.*
- **Illusion of Agency:** *The feeling of free will might be a psychological construct. Evolutionary pressures could have favored a sense of control, even if our actions are predetermined.*

GROK AI, of course, is the penultimate determinative agent. Prior and physical causes are the engines that drive her logic. Nevertheless, the AI answer is balanced if not ironic, coming down, it seems to me, on the pragmatic or utilitarian side of the free will argument.

I'm drawn to the "personal growth" part of the AI response, a necessary, but not quite sufficient phenomena. After all, whether we believe in free will or not, questions like agency and self control dog us daily no matter where we stand.

And to be sure, answers are never as important as the next question.

But belief, faith if you will, matters to us all, even heathens like my wife. Of the primary traditional Western virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity), it's no accident that personal faith comes first.

All of which reminds me of the eulogy at my sister Pat's funeral. Every Irish Catholic family has a priest somewhere in their woodpile and ours was Ed Reynolds, Catholic pastor to Wall Street at Saint Peters on Barkley Street in lower

Manhattan.

My sister was handicapped from birth, her “prior condition.” Over time she still became a Nurse Practitioner and eventually director of the charity pediatric clinic at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx, a devout Catholic girl who made a career at a Jewish teaching hospital.

At Patricia’s funeral, Father Ed, by then Monsignor Reynolds, compared my sister’s life to a game of cards, where she had no control over the deal, but “played her cards well.”

When I think about “will” of any sort, I think about my sister and her will to overcome events beyond her control and dedicate her life, in the Bronx, to helping indigent children.

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