

Free Will #2, Rothbard, Movie View: Escape Artist



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"Finding the Challenges" is an original column appearing every other Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Verbal Vol. Verbal is a software engineer, college professor, corporate information officer, life long student, farmer, libertarian, literarian, student of computer science and self-ordering phenomena. Archived columns can be found [here](#). FTC-only RSS feed available [here](#).

This has been the busiest Summer ever for me. This is the second time in a row that my column missed its Wednesday appointment. I hope that no one is using me as an alarm clock or in place of a string tied around the finger. We pundits of the web are on the cusp of a paradigmatic change in the industry of wordsmithing. The Gutenberg Press brought with it a requirement of deadlines — everything that was not ready for typeset at a strict point in time was likely lost to the ages or at least to a later edition. Now the Internet puts the emphasis on dynamic content. You can access the spectrum from news to the archaic. I hope my musings are more permanent than news, so they are not afflicted with the spottiness and inaccuracies that typify the rush to break a story. I try to avoid dependency on "nowness."

This is a matter of choice on my part, a matter of free will. The Internet has somewhat freed us from the artificial cage of time — why not take advantage?

I will visit free will (or voluntaryism, or choice, if you will), again, (see previous column). I will also bring in a Murray Rothbard quote on free will where he quotes other notable and important champions of freedom. And in the third segment we will look at something else, the outcomes of choices.

More on the Topic of Free Will

I have been thinking quite a bit more about the supposed clash between determinism and free will. I have no determinate answers but I will say that I expect that free choice exists within and outside the closed systems in which determined results may be observed, and here are some other observations:

- If an individual perceives a cause and effect relationship between his choices and expected results, how would this be different from free will?

- I have thought, after deeper consideration, that the free will versus determination question is a residual of the religion versus science dispute, and that dispute is a power struggle between religious leaders and the gatekeepers of science (in the European pre-Renaissance period the groups were one and the same). The scientists believe that we can wait long enough to observe the answers to all questions in the universe, while the spiritual advisors knowing the shortness of life feel that we must be taken under wing before we depart. In the end, at least here on Earth, their wants are much the same — both wish us to believe that in time one or the other will prove the answer.
- Some of the faiths of the world have posited free will as a necessary adjunct to accident, bad outcomes, evil, and death. It is offered that free will can explain when bad things happen to good people without blaming these problems on a deity. The religious advisers tell us they will guide us toward constructive free will and useful choices, and that this guidance alone will turn the mysteries into afterlife assurances.
- That we usually approach the problem as faith contrasted with knowledge often limits the question to concrete dimensions, abstract dimensions, and mysterious dimensions — a trio of dimension sets without end.
- We can only see what we now see until we devise a way to see something new. Cartesian physics gave way to Newtonian physics which led to relativity and further to probabilistic ideas from quantum physics. But we will never know if that which is now a mystery will always be segmented into new knowledge and further mystery. I suspect that mystery is less quantifiable and more expansive than the theoretical universe.
- I further suspect that neither choice nor determination will ever prevail, as neither science nor religion will.

Rothbard Quote #4

Not only does Professor Rothbard share illumination with us within the following quote, but he shares other minds. This is the best facet of quotes, as long as they are not abused and are understood in the indelible nature of their context. I love quotes because they help me to stand on the shoulders of giants or to be immersed in hinge events in the history of philosophy. Rothbard was a wonderful sharer, in both quality and quantity.

*But the fundamental libertarian creed holds that **every individual is capable of free will and free choice** (emphasis added); that no one, however likely to commit a crime in the future based on a statistical or any other judgment, is inevitably determined to do so; and that, in any case, it is immoral, and itself invasive and criminal, to coerce anyone who is not an overt and present, rather than a suspected, criminal.*

Recently Dr. Szasz was asked, "But don't you think that society has the right and the duty to care for those individuals adjudged to be 'dangerous to themselves and others'?" Szasz cogently replied:

I think the idea of "helping" people by imprisoning them and doing terrible things to them is a religious concept, as the idea of "saving" witches by torture and burning once was. As far as "dangerousness to self" is concerned, I believe, as did John Stuart Mill, that a man's body and soul are his own, not the state's. And furthermore, that each individual has the "right," if you will, to do with his body as he pleases—so long as he doesn't harm anyone else, or infringe on someone else's right.

As far as "dangerousness to others" goes, most psychiatrists working with hospitalized patients would admit this is pure fantasy. . . . There have in fact been statistical studies made which show that mental patients are much more law-abiding than the normal population.

And civil liberties lawyer Bruce Ennis adds that:

We know that 85 percent of all ex-convicts will commit more crimes in the future and that ghetto residents and teen-age males are far more likely to commit crime than the average member of the population. We also know, from recent studies, that

mental patients are statistically less dangerous than the average guy. So if what we're really worried about is danger, why don't we, first, lock up all former convicts, and then lock up all ghetto residents, and then why don't we lock up all teenage males?

. . . The question Szasz has been asking is: If a person hasn't broken a law, what right has society to lock him up?"

In recent times we have seen this dilemma again, twice. Because hindsight, in the observer, is 20-20, many demand to know why these lone wolves in Chattanooga and Lafayette were not ferreted out in advance and kept away from the rest of us. Check your premises. Who do any of us know who has a crystal view of the future? Saying something ought to be done is not a prediction of the future. How would any of us implement a plan wherein we could identify would-be miscreants then rip their freedom away in advance of their having done anything.

Even if we know statistically that only 1 in 6 released prisoners will not return to prison, we cannot know before the fact whom the 5 will be. And it would be ludicrous to suppose that we could incarcerate all male teenagers, as pleasing as that prospect may be.

Voluntaryism Movie View: The Escape Artist

On PBS' Masterpiece Mystery this year there was aired an excellent drama, from BBC Drama Productions, entitled "The Escape Artist."

It is not my intent to catch you off guard with spoilers, and actually the denouement of this screenplay has not much to do with my main point, so I will not cover it. I analyze the plot here as a strong showing of the relation between choices and unintended consequences, showing also that beyond the fourth dimension, that of time, there lurks probability and complexity (potentially measured in numerous ways).

A young lawyer, a barrister in the British system, has never lost a court case. In this

instance he is brought a man who may have committed a heinous murder. Proceeding on the professional ethic that every man is entitled to a defense, the barrister pulls a technical rabbit from a hat winning freedom for his client. The barrister has preserved his won-lost record, however, the accused's innocence is never tried. But now the unforeseen consequences begin to pile up — and they are all the entailment of most of the significant choices that the lawyer has made throughout his life. He's married, he has a son, he has bought a secluded retreat, he has chosen the law as a profession, he has decided to strive for a type of excellence, he has intellectually accepted most of the inside baseball of his trade, he has honed his skills by challenging the skills of others. What could go wrong? Everything.

The tale turns on the hoary precept that every defendant deserves a defense. How many places are there in the law, whether in England or here, where the adherence to preconceived notions is held to outweigh ensuing truths? If life was deterministic rather than a function of individual will, and clashes of wills, then unforeseen consequences would fade. If life did not present us at times with two paths that may be right but that have entirely different prospects and probabilities, then we would have the chance of never going astray.

Infinite questions, unforeseen consequences, and constrained answers are our lot. Some certainty and peace may be found in seeking observable truth while maintaining a wonder about mystery and the unknown. But no matter how far out on this limb we explore, we must as individuals keep our own counsel, and volunteer to act in accordance with the concentric spheres of responsibility that revolve around our own spot in space and time.

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