



Module 5

Freedom and Responsibility

Teacher's Notes

This module relies on having done modules 3 and 4 (*Naturalism & Supernaturalism* and *Free Will & Determinism*).

● Background Information

To be responsible means to be the proper subject of praise or blame, and most people intuitively believe that responsibility depends upon free will. How can you be responsible for doing something if you weren't free to either choose to do it or to refrain from doing it? Many would agree with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant that 'freedom... must be the foundation of all moral laws and the consequent responsibility.' This type of freedom is technically called 'libertarian free will'.

One of the main themes of the film *The Island* is the human desire for freedom and adult autonomy.

● Links to Conference

The *Ethics in an Age of Science* conference explores the link between the concepts of freedom and responsibility.

● Learning Objectives (from the National Framework for RE)

By the end of this module students will have:

- Investigated, studied and interpreted a significant religious, philosophical and ethical issue (freedom and responsibility)
- Thought rigorously about this issue and presented coherent and detailed arguments about values and issues, drawing well-substantiated conclusions
- Used specialist vocabulary to evaluate the power and limitations of religious language

Lesson Plan

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| • Introduce the module using the Opening Activity and share the learning objectives with the students | 15 mins |
| • Hand out the Stimulus Material and give students time to read it | 5 mins |
| • Have a class discussion using some or all of the Discussion Questions | 20 mins |
| • Use the Assessment of Learning activity and revisit the learning objectives | 20 mins |

See the general introductory notes for more information and ideas on how to run each part of the lesson. Remember that words marked like this^g are listed in the Glossary.

Please note: This material is only to be used in conjunction with *Ethics in an Age of Science* in the same academic year as the school has had this conference.

● Opening Activity

Present students with the following story:

Criminal Mastermind Professor Irritating wanted to make some quick bucks, so he devised a fiendishly elaborate plan to rob a bank. First, he hypnotised the bank's night-guard to unlock the front door whenever he heard his watch chime midnight and to lock it again an hour later whilst being totally oblivious to anything that happened in the meantime. Then Professor Irritating programmed his hench-robots to go to the bank at midnight, enter the open bank door, crack the combination lock on the bank's safe and return the contents of the safe to Professor Irritating, but only after locking the safe behind them so the guard wouldn't notice that anything was amiss after 1am. Professor Irritating's plan goes without a hitch and he is never caught.

Ask students to vote on whether they consider the following characters to be guilty/not guilty of committing a crime. Discuss with the students why they vote the way they do.

- The hypnotised guard
- The hench-robots
- Professor Irritating

(The robots were only following their programming – surely they can't be blamed for what they did. Any free will the guard had was overpowered by Professor Irritating – surely the guard isn't to be blamed for what he unknowingly did.)

Now tell the students this additional background information about Professor Irritating and ask them if this changes how they would vote:

Professor Irritating came from a very poor family and the other children at school always teased him about wearing cheap clothes and being a geek. Under this environmental pressure he resolved to show everyone that he wasn't to be messed with and to use his genius to rob banks so he could afford nice clothes.

Does this environmental pressure excuse Professor Irritating's actions and make him 'not guilty'?

What if Professor Irritating had been genetically engineered by his father, Professor Irritating Senior, to have a specific and overwhelming desire to rob banks? Would Professor Irritating (Junior) be guilty then? Who would be guilty?



● Stimulus Material

- these quotations are specifically referred to in the discussion questions

'[F]reedom... must be the foundation of all moral laws and the consequent responsibility.'

Immanuel Kant [1724-1804, influential German philosopher], Critique of Practical Reason, (1788), available from: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/5683>

'It's the choices that make us who we are, and we can always choose to do what's right.'

Spider-Man in Spider-Man 3, (Sony Pictures, 2007, certificate 12)

'Christianity presupposes free will in both the religious and the moral spheres. If our wills were not free in the religious sphere there would be... no genuine offer of salvation, no genuine invitation to eternal life... If our wills were not morally free we should not be responsible for our actions and so accountable to God.'

H.P. Owen [Welsh philosopher], Christian Theism^g: A Study in its Basic Principles, (T & T Clark, 1984), p. 117.

'As scientists, we believe that human brains, though they may not work in the same way as man-made computers, are as surely governed by the laws of physics. When a computer malfunctions, we do not punish it. We track down the problem and fix it, usually by replacing a damaged component, either in hardware or software.'

Richard Dawkins [Oxford University Zoologist, former Professor of the Public Understanding of Science], quoted in Mario Beauregard & Denyse O'Leary, The Spiritual Brain, (Harper One, 2007), p. 118.

'It would seem, if determinism^g is true, that we would never be justified in punishing any criminal, no matter how terrible the crime. Nor would it ever be appropriate to praise a person for an action, no matter how heroic.'

Norman L. Geisler [Distinguished Professor of Theology and Apologetics at Veritas Evangelical Seminary] & Paul D. Feinberg, [Professor of biblical and systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School], Introduction to Philosophy^g: A Christian Perspective, (Baker, 1997), p. 196.

'[P]hysicalism^g requires a radical revision of our common-sense notions of freedom, moral obligation, responsibility, and punishment. On the other hand, if these common-sense notions are true, physicalism is false.'

Gary R. Habermas [Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Liberty University] & J.P. Moreland [Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University], Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality, (Crossway Publishers, 2004), p. 60.

'In seeing us as determined by material forces outside our control, materialism^g removes from us the possibility that what we believe and decide might be rationally decided by us after free inquiry. It thus undermines its own credentials as a doctrine to be accepted on rational grounds, for on its own account people believe things only because physical forces compel them to do so.'

Antony O'Hear [Oxford philosopher], Philosophy, (Continuum, 2001), p. 12.

'[E]volution has given us a form of experience of voluntary action where the experience of freedom... is built into the very structure of conscious, voluntary, intentional human behaviour. For that reason, I believe, neither this discussion nor any other will ever convince us that our behaviour is unfree.'

John Searle [Professor of Philosophy of Mind and Language at the University of California, Berkeley], Minds, Brains and Science, (Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 98.

'If my opinions are just chemical events, they... can't be something I ought or ought not to have. And in that case my beliefs aren't rational at all.'

Stephen R. L. Clark [Professor of Philosophy at the University of Liverpool], God, Religion and Reality, (SPCK, 1998), p. 98.

'If my opinions are just chemical events, they... can't be something I ought or ought not to have. And in that case my beliefs aren't rational at all.'

● Discussion Questions & Hints

Note that those questions indicated with this graphic  form an easier route through the module.

-  1 Is it our choices that make us who we are, or is it who we are that makes our choices?

Teacher's hints:

Could the answer be 'both'? Maybe who we are affects our choices without determining them, and maybe our choices affect who we are without determining that either.

-  2 Could you ever be responsible for failing to do something that you weren't free to do?

Teacher's hints:

For example, could you be responsible for failing to do the washing up if you were sick in hospital?

-  3 Could you ever be responsible for doing something that you weren't free not to do?


Teacher's hints:

For example, are you responsible for the fact that your eyelids were blinking yesterday?

- 4 Is there something odd about the fact that John Searle claims that humans are not free and that evolution has given us such a powerful illusion of free will that no one could ever believe that they are not free?

Teacher's hints:

On the face of it this claim is not only odd, but self-contradictory. On the one hand Searl says no one could ever believe that they are not free, but on the other hand Searl says that he believes that he is not free!

-  5 Is Stephen Clark right to think that there is a link between rationality (how we reason about things) and morality (how we ought to think and behave)?

Teacher's hints:

Are we ever right to complain about someone being unreasonable?

6 How would adopting Richard Dawkins' view of humanity affect the legal system?

Teacher's hints:

It would do away with any notion of punishing people for wrongdoing or giving them opportunities to freely choose to reform their character or behaviour.

7 Can determinists hold people who believe in free will responsible for their belief in free will?

Teacher's hints:

That depends upon whether or not responsibility depends upon free will as Kant believed.

➤ 8 Why do you think Kant was right/wrong about responsibility depending upon free will?

Teacher's hints:

This question relates closely to the first two questions.

➤ 9 Should we treat criminals like damaged machines with faulty components?

Teacher's hints:

One's answer surely depends upon whether or not one thinks that criminals are nothing but a 'machine' that is damaged in some way.

10 With reference to the quotation from H.P. Owen, do you think that if humans don't have free will then Christianity must be false? What about other religious traditions?

Teacher's hints:

Calvinist Christians (one denomination of Christianity) might question Owen's belief that Christianity requires freedom in the religious sphere (because they believe that God determines who will go to Heaven), but would agree that we have freedom in the moral sphere. Other Christians might disagree because they believe all people have a choice whether to have a relationship with God, and therefore whether they will go to Heaven when they die. They believe Christianity requires humans to have free will.

● Assessment of Learning

Suppose that you are a judge who has to pass sentence upon Professor Irritating (Junior) for bank robbery. You have access to all the background information discussed in the opening exercise. Explain whether or not you are going to punish his crime and why you have taken this view in light of the evidence.

Teacher's hints:

This task could be done as a role-played court case with some pupils writing his defence, others writing for the prosecution. The teacher could act as the judge. Alternately, pupils could write a speech which will be peer-marked for clarity of argument and evidence included.

Feedback

We would really value your feedback on this set of supplementary material. When you have used a module, please send us your comments on how the lesson went and any suggestions of changes you would recommend. You can send these directly to us using the details below – or you might find it easier to have one teacher collate feedback from a series of lessons and send it to us all at once.

Details to send feedback to:

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