

# When Our Choices are Not Really Our Own

*How Hidden Motives for Unhappiness Keep Us from Creating the Life We Truly Want, and What Can Be Done*

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In each stage of our lives, there are forks in the road: What college shall we attend? What career shall we chose? Shall we marry? Whom shall we marry? How many children, if any, shall we have? At what age should we retire? and so on. Most of us experience each choice as up to us, yet sometimes when we look back we may sense that hidden forces were operating to push us down paths we wish we had not taken. We wonder: to what extent are our decisions the product of free choice and to what extent are we being influenced by forces outside of our control?

The conclusions we draw about the degree to which human choices are freely made concern not only our own experience of ourselves, but also are vital in the social realm. Welfare laws, criminal laws, educational practices, psychotherapeutic interventions,

and parenting goals and strategies all embody and are shaped by beliefs about the extent to which we believe that individuals have control over the choices they make. To illustrate, those of you who work in the mental health field believe that it is within your clients' power to make changes in their lives. The issue with which you struggle is *how* to empower clients to make changes, not *whether* change is possible. In turn, clients turn to psychotherapy because they believe that with help they can change. In practice, the diagnosis that a person is "untreatable," that is, unable effectively to choose positive change is actually applicable to very few clients.

Parents struggle to determine the extent to which their children's choices are free and they differ in their understanding of children's problematic behaviors. They may see problematic behaviors as: products of inborn traits, willful choice, anti-social motives, age-appropriate immaturity, or inner unhappiness. How parents decide to manage their children's behavior will be determined to a large extent by the degree to which they believe children are freely choosing to behave as they do.

Similarly in the classroom, when children are restless, inattentive, or aggressive, do teachers view these behaviors as freely

chosen and punish children with time-outs or visits to the principal, or do they understand them as a product of developmental immaturity, a curriculum that is overly demanding, or emotional problems.

Free will is an evergreen theological, philosophical, sociological, and psychological problem. I hope to offer you a way to think about freedom of choice that will get the discussion out of the rut in which it has become mired and set it on a more fruitful course. I would like to set the stage with a brief overview of some representative philosophical and psychological views of freedom of choice; discuss some limitations of these views; explain why freedom of choice is the human birthright; and present a new understanding of what goes wrong when choices are unfree. I will then suggest strategies by which parents, therapists, educators, and individuals can enhance their ability both to make good choices for themselves, and also to help others develop the capacity to make choices that do not turn out to be self-defeating or self-destructive.

Certainly, beliefs about free will are deeply rooted in their historical and cultural milieus. In ancient Greece, constraints on free will were seen as imposed by Fate, the Gods, or human ignorance. At the same time, by and large, the Greeks did preserve the

possibility of free choice. For example, while Greek tragedies embody the pessimistic notion that “character is fate,” the cause of action usually remains within the individual’s control. Oedipus is a powerful and tragic figure precisely because we believe both that he was fated to kill his father and marry his mother, and also that at any moment he could have made choices that would have nullified the Prophecy (not killed anyone, remained single). And Socrates believed that when people made bad choices, they did so from ignorance and not because they were too weak to resist temptation. He believed that people could be taught to be virtuous, that is, to choose wisely.

Even those in ancient Greece who believed in a “determined” universe, such as the Epicureans, did not allow these beliefs definitively to negate subjectively experienced freedom of choice. The Epicureans made room for atoms to “swerve,” thus making it possible to maintain the belief that people have some measure of control over their lives. In the Middle Ages, free will debates mostly focused on theological issues, such as whether or how God’s omnipotence and omniscience in combination with his grace could

leave room for the degree of free choice necessary for acts of sin, confession, and penance to be meaningful.

When the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment brought a new view of a world regulated by universal natural laws that could be comprehended through scientific observation, it became increasingly difficult to preserve the notion of some type of functional and viable free will. Since then, the debate about free will has mainly revolved around the question of the extent to which human choice is affected by the laws that operate in the natural world.

“Hard determinists” argue that all events in the natural world can in principle be predicted and explained by universal natural laws that start with a given set of initial conditions, with the result that hard determinists have been generally pessimistic about the possibility of free will. The overriding forces that hard determinists believe make free will impossible range from Newtonian physics, to human genetics, to unconscious forces. For example, Pierre Simon de Laplace, the 18<sup>th</sup> century mathematician and physicist, believed that everything in the universe, including human choice, is thoroughly regulated and predetermined by the laws of the natural world. He illustrated this conviction using the metaphor of an omniscient

intellect, subsequently referred to as a “Laplacean demon,” who would be able to predict everything in the universe based on knowing initial conditions and the applicable natural laws. Freud is also an example of a hard determinist. He believed that unconscious physical drives (the id) that are necessarily and inescapably outside of human control rob humans of the possibility of free choice. He called his brand of determinism, “psychic determinism.”

The discovery of quantum indeterminacy (the limits of predictability of reality at the sub-atomic level) has been construed as casting doubt on the argument that natural laws make free will impossible. But the fact that random chance operates at some fundamental level of reality cannot confer free will upon us, because if our actions are the result of random (quantum) events, *we* are not any more in charge of them than if they were determined by pre-existing universal laws.

I would suggest to you that genuine free will, which I define as the capacity to have self-regulatory control over our own inner well-being and everyday choices, that is, to make choices and live a life that does not satisfy hidden agendas, is both possible and self-sustaining. Whereas the contemporary debate over free will has

focused largely on the effect the laws that govern impersonal physical reality exert on freedom of choice, in fact personal meaning is at the heart of the matter. We do need a functioning brain and a stable universe in order to make choices, but impersonal physical laws are only the necessary, but not the sufficient condition for free will.

Certainly, human subjective experience is embedded in the natural world. That is, it is not true that we must resort to metaphysics (non-material reality) in order to argue that choices can be free. Yet it is also a mistake to see natural laws as the most important or relevant cause of conscious experience, including choice. Our clinical research, supported by experimental research in the field of child development, has taught us that the subjective experience of agency, including choice, is regulated by a special type of cause arising within consciousness, namely the search for personal meaning. This new understanding, which I am about to describe, leads to an entirely different way of thinking about both free and unfree choice.

It is true that both the body and the mind are components of a unified physical being, and so are affected by genetic make-up and are vulnerable to disease and decay. But given good health and a

normally functioning brain, the transforming impact of early experience on young children's consciousness is the most important determinant of the extent to which an individual's choices will be truly free. Gravity, chaos, genetics, and the laws of motions are relevant for certain purposes, such as building airplanes, predicting weather, and identifying inherited diseases. But understanding what makes neurons fire or buildings stand up is not going to help us to understand whether and under what circumstances our choices are free. An individual who fell from a tree would be subject to the laws of gravity, but how she felt about herself while falling would be a function of something else entirely.

The most important discovery underlying Intrapsychic Humanism and its many applications to parenting, psychotherapy, education, self-help, etc. is that the primary attribute of consciousness is that it generates meaning. Consciousness steadily produces ideals which have to be matched by experience in a process of perceptual identity if an organism is to survive. Every time there is a match between an ideal and an experience, that is, every time there is an act of perceptual identity, meaning is created. To illustrate, every baby is born with a consciousness-generated ideal to feel she is the



cause of the parental love she needs and wants. Experiences of being held, fed, snuggled, and so on all serve to gratify this ideal (to complete the act of perceptual identity) and, thereby, to convey the meaning that she is an agent with the power to cause her parents to love her.

Meaning, then, is the pleasure or gratification that is produced by an act of perceptual identity. So motive can be defined as the need to find an experience that matches an ideal, which is equivalent to saying that motives are needs for meaning (for perceptual identity). I know this understanding of consciousness is new to some of you, and also that I am only providing a brief summary today, which is why in the next day or two I will post this talk on my website so that anyone interested can revisit these concepts.

The power of the consciousness-generated need for meaning to regulate behavior can be seen in other animals as well as in humans. As William Wimsatt describes in his paper, "Purposiveness and Intentionality in Nature," the consciousness generated ideal of experiencing light is so powerful in the caterpillar that the caterpillar will gravitate toward the light at one end of a test tube, ignore the food available at the other end of the test tube, and starve to death.

In humans, the most fundamental personal meaning is intrapsychic meaning or primary happiness. It is the conviction that one can cause the love of one's parents and, in this way, bring about one's own inner well being. This fundamental meaning, or pleasure, is necessary to sustain human life. It is not an affect, but rather a process of perceptual identity that signifies congruence between the ideal of being the cause of parental love and the percept (experience) of matching or actualizing that ideal.

If parenting is accurate and adequate, experiences that gratify the fundamental ideal of causing parental love will match that ideal, and children will develop an empirical, unshakable knowledge of their own capacity to cause the personal meaning they need, that is, to regulate their inner well-being. Often people who misunderstand the Smart Love emphasis on nurturing children's inner happiness conclude that happy children will be complacent, unmotivated children. Nothing could be further from the truth. Because they have minds of their own in the sense that they can make good choices and pursue them without conflict, truly happy children are resilient self-starters who are naturally curious, who are undeterred by set-backs, and who will reach their full potentials.

As I will explain in greater detail shortly, when, for whatever reason, parenting is inaccurate or inadequate, children still need to register a match between their experience and their fundamental ideal of causing parental love in order to maintain an acceptable level of inner-well being, but that match will be illusional in that children will accept any experience of unhappiness that results from inaccurate parenting as signifying the perfect happiness they seek and need. The inability of young children to evaluate the quality of the care they are getting ensures that most will survive, but it also lays the ground work for psychopathology, that is, for choices that are not free.

Whether genuine or illusional, the ongoing belief that one is or had been the cause of the love of one's parents (or significant caregivers) is necessary for life to continue. In all but the most extreme cases, in the face of inaccurate parental caregiving or parental caregiving that is interrupted by factors such as parental death or social dislocation, the fundamental ideal of causing parental love can and will be gratified illusionally.

One tragic but empirical proof of the fundamental need for the meaning of causing parental love can be seen when institutionalized infants and toddlers are not provided with a caregiving relationship

that is sufficiently stable to allow even an illusional gratification of their motive to feel they are causing the caregiving love they need. In spite of the fact that all of their physiological needs, including nutrition, are met, if they cannot form a relationship with a caregiver, these children will refuse food, waste away and die from marasmus. The most dramatic illustration of the regulatory and life-giving power of the ongoing, consciousness-generated search for meaning occurs when the process fails, as in marasmus.

As I will explain shortly, when individuals make choices that are unfree in the sense of being in the service of hidden agendas, the root cause is that they have misidentified the unhappiness they felt as very young children when they didn't get accurate parenting with ideal happiness they are causing. Out of love for their parents, children develop motives for unhappiness that they have misidentified as happiness and these motives for unhappiness shape and direct at least some of their choices, making them unfree.

I hasten to add and emphasize that because parents have so often been blamed for children's problems, my assertion that children develop inner unhappiness when their parents are unable to respond to their developmental needs can easily be misunderstood as blaming

parents and especially mothers. But this is emphatically not the case. Parents do their best to make their children happy, and they want to understand how children become unhappy. Moreover, they are eager to learn how to guide unhappy children back on the road to a happy and productive life.

In other words, the fact that some parents find it difficult to respond to their children's developmental needs in no way implies that they lack good intentions, are not trying to do their best, or are not loving and kind to their children. These parents are either stymied by external constraints such as illness or social deprivation or upheaval; do not have an accurate understanding of their children's true developmental needs; or, themselves, suffer from an inner unhappiness that gets in the way of their ability to parent effectively.

*Put differently, cause and moral responsibility are not equivalent.* To equate them is in effect to say that the person who was unaware that she was coming down with a cold and who unintentionally spread the virus to an elevator full of people was to blame for their subsequent illness. Parents whose children develop inner unhappiness are themselves victims of political, social, or economic interferences they cannot control; are mistakenly but

understandably convinced that their caregiving is exemplary; are tortured by their inability, in the face of tremendous effort, to live up to their parenting ideals; or are blinded by an altered state of awareness brought on by substance abuse, physical illness, or emotional distress. And all parents retain the inborn desire to love their children well and without reservation.

One message I want to be sure to convey today is that if parenting is accurate and adequate children will achieve their human birthright and become adults whose choices are free. Children whose developmental needs are really met, that is, who are never made gratuitously unhappy, who are comforted when life brings them unhappiness, and who are not encumbered by age-inappropriate expectations, never develop motives for unhappiness masquerading as unhappiness. As a result, their choices reflect their intentions and do not undermine or sabotage their inner happiness - but more on this in a few minutes.

In addition to primary happiness, which is the ongoing meaning of having satisfied the inborn need to be the cause of the unconditional love of one's parents, there exists a type of meaning, I have called secondary happiness, which is derived from regulating

and gratifying social, physiological, and cognitive motives. During development, all children use secondary happiness (i.e., winning a game, having a friend) to some degree to supply themselves with fundamental inner well being. Once childhood is over, however, individuals who have received accurate and adequate parenting will no longer need to use social, physiological, or cognitive experiences in the service of feeling loved or lovable (that is, in the service of maintaining fundamental inner well-being). As adults, their everyday choices (how much they eat, whom they choose to marry, what job they take) will be free of unrecognized agendas.

In early childhood, experiences necessary to gratify the fundamental ideal of feeling loved, loveable, and loving are external to children's sense of agency, because they come either from parents or from the gratification provided by secondary happiness. However, once children develop the maturity to perceive the stability of their parents' motives to love and care for them, their certainty of their ability to bring about the caring they need can substitute for the moment-to-moment caring responses that had previously been required to provide them with inner well-being. In other words, children will develop the capacity to perceive that their parents'

motives to respond accurately to them are stable even at moments when parents are temporarily prevented from responding (they are cooking or taking a business call). This certainty of parents' loving commitment frees children from needing immediate instances of parental caregiving in order to experience themselves as having the capacity to bring about their own inner well-being. For the first time they, themselves, can gratify the fundamental ideal of self-regulatory agency generated within consciousness. At this moment, their own agent-self becomes the true cause of their own existence. They have transcended the history of their earlier development in that they have developed the capacity to be in control of their inner well being. However, until the end of adolescence, this capacity still needs to be nurtured and supported by a loving parental relationship.

At the end of adolescence, agency can become truly free. On a fundamental level, individuals can acquire the freedom that comes from having non-illusional control over their own inner well-being. On the level of social, physiological, and cognitive pursuits, an individual's choices become free in that they are not in the service of unrecognized agendas, especially including needs for unhappiness. This individual will not get in her own way, nor will she pursue motives



she does not want to gratify. And motives that are chosen will be pursued without internal conflict. This is the process by which our birthright of free will, that is the freedom to make choices untainted by hidden agendas, is made truly possible.

I turn now to the lack of free will that characterizes individuals who for various reasons find themselves in the situation described in common discussions of free will - they subjectively experience a freedom of choice that is greater than they actually possess. There are two ways in which agency, or choice, can be unfree. First, when people cannot regulate, that is, stably provide for their own inner well-being, it needs to be maintained by everyday experience, which illusionally gratifies the fundamental ideal of being loved and loveable. Any and all experience can be used for illusional gratification of the need for the personal meaning of being loved and loveable. For example, the pleasure of getting a promotion can take on the meaning of inner well-being. A person may feel some version of, "I am worthwhile because I got a promotion." In contrast, a person who received accurate caregiving will be happy about getting a promotion, but her feelings about herself as a person will remain unaffected.

The problem with using secondary happiness to provide inner well being is that secondary happiness is by definition unstable because of the effects of chance, failure to reach a desired goal, social discord, health problems, positive entropy, and so on. To illustrate, the failure to get a promotion can shake the inner well-being of a person who needs to rely on external experiences for inner well being, and may cause her to feel, "I am not a worthwhile person." In contrast, the person who received accurate parenting will have a self-caused, self-sustaining inner well-being, and, while she may feel disappointed at not being promoted, she will not feel any the less worthwhile.

The second way in which the will can be unfree is due to the effect of unrecognized needs for unhappiness. As I described earlier, babies and young children are born believing both that their every experience is intended by their parents, and also that their parents are perfect. Obviously, from the viewpoint of survival, it is adaptive that young children adore their parents, want to be just like them, and believe that whatever caregiving they get is ideal. We all know that parenting is demanding and frequently requires putting aside important personal motives, so the adoration young children have for

their parents regardless of the quality of the care they receive helps insure that children will attract at least the minimal level of the care they need to thrive and survive.

One consequence of the fact that young children idealize whatever care they get is that from birth through the early years, imitation is the most powerful engine of learning. The motive for physical imitation can be seen in newborns who, as researcher Andrew Meltzoff has shown, will stick their tongues out in imitation of an adult even though they cannot see their own faces. More significantly, babies and young children are just as powerfully motivated to copy their parents' treatment of them. The problem is that the immaturity of their minds leads young children to attribute parental intentionality to each experience they have. Put differently, young children attribute to every experience, even unhappy experiences, the meaning of matching the fundamental ideal of parental love; that is, every experience supplies them with the meaning of being a person with the ability to cause their parents' love.

So, for example, if children are left uncomforted or too much is expected of them, they conclude that the unhappiness they feel is the perfect happiness their parents want for them, and they develop

needs to experience more of the unhappiness they have confused with happiness. The result is an unfree will in the sense that even while these individuals are consciously seeking happiness, their learned, unrecognized needs for unhappiness sometimes cause them to undermine their good intentions and to dilute experiences of genuine pleasure by creating experiences of unpleasure. Because this misidentification of unhappiness and happiness occurs very early, before the onset of competent language and sophisticated cognition, this confusion goes undetected.

There is a powerful analogy with the gosling that imprints on a human - even if the mother goose is subsequently introduced, the gosling will choose to follow the human. Without realizing it, the gosling has developed needs for an inferior type of caregiving (for unhappiness), since clearly the human is inferior as a caregiver to the mother goose. In geese as well as in humans, needs for unhappiness arise from needs for love that are not adequately met.

The misidentification of unhappiness as happiness occurs in other animals as well. A study in *Nature* entitled "Good memories of bad events in infancy" shows that when very young rats are given unpleasant shocks in the presence of a particular odor, they develop

a *preference* for that odor in spite of the pain that has accompanied it. The appetitive preference for that odor, that is, for unhappiness that has been misidentified as happiness, persists even when the rats mature to the point that they are capable of learning aversive behavior to other kinds of negative experiences.

Individuals who receive inaccurate or inadequate caregiving are to an important degree affected by their early history because they don't develop autonomous regulatory control over their own inner well-being or their choice of physiological, social, or cognitive motives. Yet these individuals retain the illusion of control; in fact, they must retain such a conviction or they will not survive. Many acts feel chosen that are not truly intended. An example is the person who vows not to spend money on clothes for two months and then a week later buys a new jacket and immediately feels regretful. The act of buying the jacket is intentional in the sense that the person wasn't hypnotized or coerced, but the purchase was certainly not intended in any meaningful way.

You can see that it is possible for someone to be sane i.e. to have superb reality testing (cognitive functioning) and yet not to have free will. For example, cognitive experiences, such as working on a

crossword problem or solving a complex mathematical problem, can be used to match the fundamental consciousness generated ideal (used to maintain inner well-being), but some of those experiences may be in the service of gratifying unrecognized needs for unhappiness. In other words, unknown to the individual, to some extent her choices are made in the service of recreating familiar experiences of unhappiness by causing pain to herself and to others. An example is the person who enjoys learning about medicine, but who uses that information to convince herself that every ache is a sign of a fatal malignancy. The distortion of the inborn ideal of genuine happiness to include experiences of unhappiness is the ultimate cause of human cruelty to self and others and is a humanistic explanation for the problem of evil.

I would like to take a moment here to respond to those who do not grant ontological status (the status of being real and researchable) to the subjective experience of agency and who conclude that it is necessary to go to the level of brain processes (e.g. neural networks) to find an acceptable object of scientific study. An example is the comment by Nobelist Francis Crick: “your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of

personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.”

An inflexible preference for reducing all complex phenomena (for example, the experience of agency) to simpler and, therefore, seemingly more researchable problems (e.g., the operation of neural networks) is called reductionism. While reductionism continues to affect decision making in many disciplines, including psychology, it is the product of an outdated and discredited philosophy of science called Logical Positivism or, sometimes, Logical Empiricism. The unwarranted mandate for reductionism can be seen in contemporary research on freedom of choice that focuses on the simplest of choices (for example, choosing between numbers, pushing buttons), whereas in reality, most interesting and relevant aspects of free will have complex actions as their referent (should I/will I cheat on this test, stay on my diet, take this job, break up with my partner, and so on). When complex, real-world problems are oversimplified in order to be studied, they can no longer be said to be the same problems. For example, much of the evidence in “evidence based psychotherapy” is so unlike psychotherapy as practiced in the real world that it only applies to psychotherapy whose sole purpose is to be “researchable.”

Neither consciousness nor the experience of agency has to be reduced to the neuronal level in order to be the legitimate object of scientific investigation. Because consciousness is a primary source of the need for meaning (motive experience) and of the signification of meaning through the process of perceptual identity, consciousness is a regulating cause and is, therefore, a genuine type of reality (has what philosophers term causal-ontological status). As the philosopher Roy Bhaskar argues so compellingly, something that cannot be apprehended concretely by one or more of our senses can still be real (and, even, known) if it has causal power - if its existence can be known from its effects. One example is gravity. Another is the perceptual identity process in which the fundamental ideal of being loveable and loved is matched by experience. This gratification may be illusional or genuine, but it can be known by its effects. For example, when it fails, the individual will not survive, as in the syndrome of marasmus.

After a paradigmatic development, the meaning of regulatory agency signified by the perceptual identity process will be genuine, that is, individuals will possess the capacity to effectively and autonomously regulate their own inner well-being and interpersonal



choices. The non-illusional quality of this self-regulatory agency can be seen by the fact that individuals who possess it have stable inner-well being and do not struggle with hidden agendas that influence interpersonal choice. The effects of this genuine self-regulatory capacity are, therefore, recognizable. In regulating inner well-being and everyday choice, genuine regulatory agency (the agent-self), is as real as other well-established causes that are not empirically perceptible (can only be known by their effects), such as subatomic particles or magnetism. Therefore it can be studied productively without being reduced to brain pathways. Moreover, such eliminative reductions risk missing the phenomenon of self-regulatory agency entirely.

Those commentators who argue that in a determined universe, the only freedom available to humans is the minimal freedom to act without undue social or other constraints (to go jogging, to eat in a restaurant) are not accounting for the wide-ranging power of a self-regulatory agency that arises from optimal parenting. But as a result of accurate parenting an individual can develop a self-regulatory agency that is free in the sense that: the individual is not constrained by her history in that she is not ruled by hidden agendas and she has

stable control over her own inner well-being and choice of motives (regardless of the workings of chance and the inevitable losses due to aging). Such an individual possesses a genuine freedom of mind. While this freedom of mind cannot exist in the absence of generative genetic transcription and a relatively stable universe, genes and physical laws are incapable either of producing that freedom or of regulating it. Freedom of the will requires that minimal conditions of biology and physics be met, but once they are met, this freedom is generated and exists at the psychological level, specifically as a result of the parenting relationship, which becomes structuralized within the individual's experience of agency.

I can now refer back to the paradoxical situation in which people who would easily pass a sanity test make choices that are not in their real interest (they are promiscuous, they engage in insider trading, they drink too much, etc.). There is a long tradition of trying to understand these choices as "rational decisions" based on the available knowledge. For example, some commentators argue that individuals who make self-defeating or self-destructive choices are making rational decisions to choose pleasure in the short run over pain in the long run.

In contrast, the concept of an addiction to unhappiness provides a more powerful and parsimonious explanation for bad choices. First, many people who do wrong not only know right from wrong, but know that they will be harmed by their decision (and may even say they don't really want to be doing it). Second, the definition of self-defeating and self-destructive acts as pleasurable is extremely problematic. Genuine pleasure and genuine happiness do not carry within them the seeds of unhappiness and harmfulness to self or others. Those who drink too much, smoke, shoplift, etc. are not choosing genuine pleasure in the short run, but rather are pursuing unhappiness they have confused with happiness. An individual's cognition (and therefore her ability to make rational choices) can unknowingly be coopted in the service of needs for unhappiness, which is why anorexics who are near death from starvation can look in the mirror and conclude that they are too fat and should choose to eat less.

The good news is that unfree choice, that is, the misidentification of unhappiness with happiness, can be minimized or, even, reversed. All of us are born with the capacity for free choice, and though some of us do not emerge from childhood with that

capability, clinical experience shows that it is never too late to at least improve our abilities to make good choices through engaging in psychotherapy or by our own efforts. This is the reason I wrote the self-help book, *Addicted to Unhappiness*, namely to give people the tools to make their choices freer and more constructive.

Every one of us has the intuitive experience that we possess a genuine capacity for choosing and pursuing specific actions and desires: we cannot live our daily lives in the belief that every one of our choices has already been or is being made for us. At the same time, we know that there are areas in which we struggle, are unable to follow through on our intentions, or discover that choices we thought were good are actually self-defeating or self-destructive. The good news is that it is never too late to turn the illusion of free will into an increasing capacity for genuine self-regulatory control through the medium of psychological or self-help.

Inner Humanism psychotherapy incorporates the developmental understanding of unfree choice set forth in Intrapsychic Humanism into the therapeutic relationship. Clients' experiences of receiving the care getting they need from their therapists acquire the meaning of an inner well-being that they cause

and regulate. Intrapsychic care-getting pleasure refers not to an affect, but to a meaning structure of effective agency nurtured by clients' experience of causing their therapist to want to give the emotional care clients need and desire. Over time, the superiority of this type of relationship-based self regulation leads clients to reject as an unnecessary and unwanted loss agency experience that is tainted by previously unrecognized motives for unhappiness. In this way, clients' choices become increasingly freer of the addiction to unhappiness.

Moreover, because the Inner Humanism therapist understands that all clients enter treatment with an addiction to unhappiness, when clients react to the accurate caregiving therapists offer by withdrawing, becoming angry, or otherwise alienating themselves, Inner Humanism therapists do not conclude that the therapy is not helping or that clients are being intentionally provocative or otherwise resistant. Inner Humanism therapists understand that these clients are in the grip of what I have called an *Aversive Reaction to Pleasure*. Aversive reactions to pleasure represent the resurgence of unrecognized motives for unhappiness in response to experiences of genuine pleasure. In other words, genuine pleasure is signified as

ungratifying by the consciousness-generated perceptual identity process that has accepted unhappiness as matching the ideal of causing and getting parental love. The result is that genuine pleasure stimulates motives for unhappiness that has been misidentified as happiness - hence the addiction to unhappiness.

Aversive reactions to pleasure occur often in other areas of clients' lives, but when they occur within the psychotherapeutic setting, therapists can help clients to recognize and understand them. Because they understand aversive reactions to pleasure, Inner Humanism therapists are not distracted by feelings of irritation, alienation, boredom, or discouragement when clients appear regressed, angry, or pessimistic. Rather, they remain available to provide steady and stable caregiving. A therapist's capacity to remain available to clients who are in the throes of an aversive reaction to pleasure allows clients to realize both that the disaffection they are feeling is self-caused, and also that the gratification to be derived from an alienated form of relating is ultimately much less pleasurable than the gratification to be derived from increased involvement in causing the caregetting available in the therapeutic relationship. This realization eventually represents an important milestone in the

process by which clients recognize and lose interest in their motives for self-caused unhappiness. In other words, aversive reactions to pleasure slowly but surely lose their appeal when contrasted with the genuine caregetting pleasure available in the therapeutic relationship.

Individuals can help themselves to gain significant freedom of choice in their lives by understanding and anticipating the influence of unrecognized needs for unhappiness on their inborn desire for genuine happiness. I am not suggesting that we consistently feel unhappy or frustrated, but that, at least occasionally, we may need to cause ourselves some type of discomfort in order to maintain our inner equilibrium.

The joy and optimism that we possess at birth is not extinguished by the addiction to unhappiness. In other words, it is never too late to learn how to regulate the addiction to unhappiness and make life significantly happier, richer, and more fulfilling. For example, knowing why and how we either prevent ourselves from attaining goals we want, or sabotage or fail to enjoy chosen goals after we reach them, gives us a foothold to sidestep these reactions and enjoy our efforts.

While an addiction to unhappiness can affect any aspect of our lives, the most common consequences are relationship conflict, self-sabotage, unwarranted self-criticism, failure to maintain a healthy life style (i.e. addictions, lack of exercise), painful moods (ie. panic attacks, depression), problems at work, and difficulty crafting an appropriate work/life balance. All of these manifestations of an unrecognized need for unhappiness are addressed in the self-help book, *Addicted to Unhappiness*.

This approach to self-help is both optimistic and realistic. It focuses equally on effective strategies for positive change and on combatting the aversive reactions to pleasure that oppose self-improvement. The addiction to unhappiness can make change hard and backsliding inevitable but, ironically, understanding that backsliding is part of the healing process prevents us from becoming depressed and giving up after moments of failure, and makes it more likely that we will persevere and succeed in making choices without hidden agendas and, therefore, in improving our lives.

Turning to parenting, I suggest that the goal should change from the moment-to-moment focus on behavior to the long term goal of giving children the gift of free will -- the capacity for the stable self-



regulation of inner well-being and an unconflicted ability to make positive choices and to form caring relationships without the contamination of learned needs for unhappiness. The essence of this kind of parenting is a scientifically-based understanding of children's needs. Parents using this approach will spare their children from needless unhappiness by not expecting their children to be miniature adults, by managing their children's behavior with loving regulation and without disciplinary measures, by comforting children when they are unhappy regardless of the cause, and by understanding that a close caregiving relationship that makes children happy will neither make their children unhealthily dependent nor harm them in some other manner.

This way of managing children's behavior, which I call "loving regulation," is entirely different from permissiveness, which simply abdicates responsibility for safeguarding children. Loving regulation, which manages children's behavior effectively without adding any negativity, is also very different from traditional forms of discipline. Children respond to even seemingly innocuous forms of "discipline," such as time-outs, by concluding that the unhappiness they feel is "good" because it is what their beloved parents intend them to feel.

Parents or other caregivers who impose traditional disciplinary measures are focused solely on changing behavior. Unfortunately they are also modifying children's perceptual processes so that motives for the happiness of causing parental love can be matched by percepts of unhappiness, thereby creating unrecognized motives for unhappiness.

The ability to regulate one's own stable inner well-being and to make interpersonal choices free of hidden agendas and needs for unhappiness is the result of the intense pleasure of involvement in the parent-child relationship and not of any type of gratuitous frustration, self-abnegation, punishments, or other imposed unhappiness. In direct contradiction to those who argue that being too nice to children spoils them, what allows an individual the true freedom of choice produced by an unshakable inner well being is the experience she had as a young child of knowing that her parents were 100% committed to giving her loving responses and comforting her unhappiness whenever possible. In other words, caregiving relationship pleasure, not relationship pain, gives people true regulatory control over their lives. The pleasure generated by informed parenting can not only create happy, fulfilled adults, but also

will help generate a world filled with citizens who are compassionate and caring and who have no need for rage, racism, war, cruelty, abusive power, or intolerance generally.

Turning to education, I suggest that there needs to be a radical reconceptualization of both teaching and classroom management. In most schools, children are regarded as inclined to take advantage of the classroom experience by being manipulative, antisocial, or otherwise recalcitrant, that is, children are assumed to be making a free choice to behave antisocially. In reality, as I have described, children are born wanting only positive relationships. To the degree that they are disruptive in class, either too much is being expected of them, or they have developed an unrecognized addiction to unhappiness. Negative attitudes and harsh measures on the part of the school simply reinforce children's needs to derive well-being through unhappy experiences they mislabel as comfortable, acceptable, or desirable.

Like parents, teachers can learn effectively to manage the children for whom they are responsible while at the same time remaining positive and optimistic about children's motives, that is, they can adopt the principles of loving regulation. Even children who

have developed an addiction to unhappiness will respond by seeking more of this constructive type of pleasure. Although these children may respond to constructive experiences of pleasure by reactively seeking experiences of unhappiness, teachers who understand the inevitability of these aversive reactions to pleasure will not conclude that kindness to children is counterproductive, but will understand that these regressions can be a sign of progress in that they are reactions to positive experiences. The regressive behavior can be managed without importing anger or alienation into the relationship.

Teachers will think differently about children who have difficulty learning or retaining what they have learned if they understand that, like adult cognition, children's cognition can be co-opted both to supply inner well-being, and also to gratify needs for unhappiness. Rather than reflexively referring struggling learners for psychotropic drugs, educators will see that in order to learn, these children need a relationship with a positive, patient, helpful adult and that it is to this end that they should direct their efforts and resources. I should add that the educational strategies and understanding I just described are the guiding principles of the Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool, Kindergarten, and Toddler Programs.

In the child welfare field, we need to help foster and adoptive parents understand that abused or neglected children who are taken from their birth parents and placed in caring homes will have reactive needs to create unhappiness. This knowledge would shrink the destructive cycle of replacements that scar so many young minds. Foster and adoptive parents who understand that abused and neglected children unknowingly develop needs for unpleasant relationship experiences, with the result that these children will inevitably react with negativity and rebellion when they are placed in a caring environment, would not label these reactive negative behaviors as willful (as ungrateful and uncaring). These foster and adoptive parents would be better able to manage acting-out children in a friendly manner and to refrain from demanding that they be removed and replaced.

And when mental health professionals working with birth parents who are trying to regain their children adopt negative or punitive attitudes toward them (when they assume birth parents are making a free choice to be neglectful or abusive), they gratify birth parents' unrecognized needs for unhappiness and make it more difficult for them to grow as caregivers. In contrast, clinical

experience with abusive and neglectful parents has shown that when helping professionals recognize that these parents possess constructive motives to be good parents, as well as having unrecognized needs for unhappiness that make it difficult for them to follow through on their positive motives, these parents are often able to make tremendous improvements in their lives and in their capacity to care for children. In other words, society can protect children from abuse or neglect by removing them to foster or adoptive homes without having to maintain the false belief that their parents are making the deliberate choice to act abusively or neglectfully. Then we will really be able to help birthparents as well as their children.

In the time that remains, I would like to touch on some social implications of the specific understanding of free will I am presenting, because confusion about free and unfree choice has had a variety of harmful consequences for society.

First, I would like to return to the issue of free will and responsibility that has been such a source of concern to most commentators. Lurking in the background of concerns about the extent to which the operation of natural laws limit our freedom of choice is the worry about the consequences not only of not being in

charge of our lives, but also of being unable to hold people responsible for their actions. The felt need to ascribe responsibility probably accounts for many of the contortions commentators have imposed on the free will debate. An example is the position that the mere forming of intentions and carrying out of actions in an unforced way (deciding to go to the grocery store and then actually going) represents sufficient freedom of action to impute responsibility.

But free will and responsibility cannot fruitfully be discussed without specifying the context in which choice is being evaluated. The focus on decontextualized individual actions is responsible for much of the staleness and stalemate in debates about freedom of choice. In contrast, when we adjust our focus to fit the purpose at hand, we avoid the necessity to torture the facts in order to hold individuals responsible for their actions. As the philosopher William Wimsatt describes, in all research an environment-system boundary separates the subject being studied (the system) from contiguous factors that are considered not necessary to the topic under study (the environment). As Wimsatt so helpfully points out, the decision about what environment-system boundary to draw is much more important than is generally recognized.

The consequence of drawing the wrong environment-system boundary in the free-will debate has been that all-important contexts that have been relegated to the environment actually exert tremendous pressure and influence on the system, i.e. on conclusions drawn about individual actions. To illustrate, when agreed upon legal, ethical, social or moral codes are violated, it is misleading to consider the issue of whether an individual can be held accountable for her actions by looking solely at the free or unfree nature of that individual's choices. Let's take the example of the requirements for mens rea, or criminal intent, sufficient to convict someone of a crime. In 1843 after Daniel McNaughton shot and killed the secretary to Prime Minister Robert Peel, he was acquitted on the basis of insanity. At that time, the legal definition of insanity was either not knowing what one was doing or not knowing right from wrong. There have been recent modifications to the insanity defense which incorporate the notions of "product of mental disease or defect" and "irresistible impulse." In spite of these recent attempts to broaden it, the insanity defense is rarely pled and just as rarely succeeds. (However, it is also the case that floridly psychotic defendants rarely go to trial.)



While legal decisions about mens rea (criminal intent) currently focus on the extent to which the accused had the option to act other than she did, in fact the environment of the problem, the fact that the actions in question violate the criminal law, silently shapes the discussion. In reality, the question of whether an individual represents a danger to society and needs to be sequestered is important to society at large and cannot be ignored. As long as we perpetuate the fiction that we are considering the defendant's capacity for free choice in a vacuum, it is not possible to take a dispassionate, realistic approach to the defendant.

Our justice system imputes freedom of choice as a means of attaching the degree of personal responsibility necessary to assign legal culpability to those lawbreakers who fail to qualify for an insanity defense. An approach to mens rea that broadens the issue of free choice to include the social context makes it possible to move beyond the narrow question of whether the defendant was "insane." It seems self-evident that even if violators' states of mind are not sufficiently disordered to meet the requirements for the insanity defense, violators are nonetheless not making a genuinely free choice to break the law (to molest a child, commit serial killings, or even, ruin a

successful career through insider trading). Rather, they are acting out an extreme form of the addiction to unhappiness.

There are better ways to hold violators accountable than to preserve the outdated, silent fiction that law breakers who don't meet the insanity test have free will. The underlying unstated fear is that if these defendants were to be considered in any way impaired in their ability to make rational, self-caretaking choices, they would be acquitted and committed to mental institutions, and their sequestration from society would not be certain. However, if we expand the system under consideration from the individual's choice to commit an illegal act to include society's need for protection and order, we could admit that most lawbreakers probably do not possess free will in the sense that their actions are in the service of unrecognized motives for unhappiness, while at the same time granting that these individuals may need to be detained securely and predictably.

This example illustrates that discussions of free will in the context of the criminal justice system are of necessity very different from the consideration of free will in a purely philosophical or psychological context. The ridicule that is often heaped on attempts

to understand criminal conduct as a product of some kind of pathological psychological process (as in the song “Gee Officer Krupke” from West Side Story) is a reaction to the argument that impaired freedom of choice should exempt violators from the law’s reach. But to focus solely on the quality of violators’ choices overlooks the fact that society has the right to protect its citizens from dangerous or inveterate lawbreakers. We can drop the fiction that offenders who don’t meet current insanity tests are acting with free will and make trials about culpability - was the law really broken and do we have the actual lawbreaker in custody. If the answer is yes, sentences can partake explicitly of society’s need both to protect itself and also to promote the kind of behavior it wants (no child molesting, no insider trading), and within that framework, perhaps we could do a better job of helping lawbreakers gain more control over their choices and become more constructive members of society.

I hope I have shown that specifying the context of any and every discussion of freedom of choice is necessary. While in legal and social contexts sanctions may have to be imposed even when an individual’s freedom of choice is impaired, there are other contexts in which it may be helpful to focus solely on psychological motivation.

Individuals who have acted self-destructively can try to change on their own or seek some sort of professional help. In the context of psychotherapy, obviously the emphasis changes from imposing sanctions to helping individuals develop the capacity to make better choices.

My goal today has been to describe that meaningful free will is not only possible - that, in fact, it is our birthright. With informed, accurate parenting and a just society every child can develop it. And to the extent to which our choices are in the service of unrecognized motives for unhappiness, we can learn to recognize these patterns and change them. Moreover, psychotherapy that partakes of this understanding of free and unfree choice can help individuals to anticipate and regulate the effects of their motives for unhappiness and more consistently to choose motives that will bring them lasting pleasure and satisfaction. Parents will understand that the inner happiness children experience when they are loved, comforted, and not made gratuitously unhappy does not spoil them but will grow adults who have stable inner happiness and the ability to make free choices. Teachers, too, will educate more effectively, that is, will

preserve children's natural curiosity and love of learning if they focus less on discipline, which feeds children's appetites for unhappiness, and more on creating a positive atmosphere in which all children, even difficult children, feel valued and cared for.

Equally important, with this new understanding of those who didn't have the good fortune to develop the capacity for free choice, as a society we can stop blaming individuals for actions that are not truly chosen and instead focus our energies on developing effective ways to help all people gain genuine control of their lives.

If you are interested in knowing more about the foundation of this psychology and philosophy of mind than I have had time to offer this afternoon, it is laid out in (very dense) detail in *Intrapsychic Humanism* and in more accessible form in *Smart Love* and *Addicted to Unhappiness* as well as in articles and presentations on my website, [marthaheinemanpieperphd.com](http://marthaheinemanpieperphd.com), where I will also post this talk. I should add that *Addicted to Unhappiness* is almost sold out, and I am in the process of editing it and putting out a second edition through Smart Love Press, but there are still a few copies available on Amazon, and I believe it can be had on both Kindle and Audible.

Thank you for listening.

At this point I would like to respond to any questions you might have.