

Your Inner Will: Finding Personal Strength in Critical Times

By Piero Ferrucci

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Each chapter focuses on a specific aspect of will and is followed by exercises that guide the reader in its development. Chapters include: Mastery, Autonomy, Freedom, Courage, Integrity, and Resilience. Ferrucci describes the pitfalls we face when our inner strength is lacking, and shows us what we can expect when it is healthfully developed. An effective will can guide us in our search for inner freedom; it helps us to take risks and to renew ourselves; it makes us feel strong and confident.

Your Inner Will is an immensely practical study that helps readers navigate crises and pursue more purposeful lives.

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Editorial Review

Review
“This book, written by a collaborator of Roberto Assagioli, presents the best of the emerging trends in philosophy, neuroscience, and cognitive therapy in order to help readers shift their focus of attention and regain power in their lives. Ferrucci is realistic, supportive, and confident in his readers’ ability to find their way through the labyrinth and into the light of conscious choice and self-determination. The book is filled with suggestions for pursuing individual inner wisdom, for putting what is learned into practice, and for opening the door to further personal growth via internal exploration.”
--***Retailing Insight***

“The author is a psychotherapist and a long-time student and practitioner of Roberto Assagioli’s psychosynthesis. He blends his clinical experience and insight with experimental studies to discuss the development of personal qualities that apply to the spiritual path: for example, depth, resilience, integrity, courage and the state of grace. Practical advice.”
--***Light of Consciousness***

“His insights are widely intuitive. The very act of reading his balanced sentences unties knots and encourages openness.”
--***Los Angeles Times***

“Piero Ferrucci evokes from the rich and complex tapestry of human endeavor the simple grace of the Way.”
--**Ram Dass**

“In my works I continue to use many of the techniques Dr. Ferrucci describes so beautifully.”
--**Stephanie Matthews-Simonton, coauthor of *Getting Well Again***

“Ferrucci keeps it simple yet profound.”
--***Publishers Weekly***

About the Author
Piero Ferrucci is a psychotherapist and philosopher. He has been a student of and collaborator with Robert Assagioli, the founder of psychosynthesis. He is the author of books including The Power of Kindness, What We May Be, Inevitable Grace, and What Our Children Teach Us, as well as the editor of The Human Situation, a book of Aldous Huxley’s lectures. He lives near Florence, Italy with his wife and two sons.

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INTRODUCTION

One day a huge, rusty gate collapsed on a four-year-old child. He was trapped under its heavy bulk. His mother ran to him. She was a small, gentle woman, and her specialty was homemade ravioli, not weight lifting. But at that moment her son was crying with pain and fear: perhaps his life was in danger. She looked about. She was alone. After a moment of dismay, she seized the enormous gate, and with all the force of desperation, and with sudden, amazing strength, lifted it. The child managed to scramble out from underneath and get free. Later, to move that dangerous gate away, it took four strong men.

That child would one day be my father; his mother, my grandmother. In this family legend, who knows how much is true or hyperbole? Yet stories of great strength manifesting in extreme circumstances are well known and have been documented. In emergency situations, our notions of what we can or cannot do are reset to zero, as powers otherwise dormant are unleashed. I believe this to be true not only for physical strength, but also for inner strength. It is an essential resource. We may lose touch with it, yet we can find it again. It is right there, accessible to us if we want it.

I see this often in the workshops I lead. I ask participants in a group to relive a time when they felt their own inner strength. All kinds of memories surface from the past: parents who, having been abandoned with children by their partner, found the energy and spirit to bring up a family; people who had a financial crisis, suffered failure or betrayal; who became unemployed at a late age; who had a serious illness; who discovered their son or daughter was alcoholic or addicted to gambling; who faced the plight of emigration, or the loss of a loved one. In short, people who, as we say in Tuscany, had felt the wolf's bite—those times when a merciless destiny assails us and we feel bewildered and frightened and alone in an endless cold. And we believe we are not going to make it.

Yet it was precisely in such dire situations that these people brought out their best: their resilience and courage, their practical intelligence, and above all their inner strength. They felt a flow of warm, powerful energy that allowed them to emerge from the crisis stronger and more alive. As the Latin saying tells us, Per aspera ad astra. Through hardship we reach the stars.

For others it was perhaps a situation less dramatic, but one that forced them to develop a previously unknown tenacity. For instance, sticking to a course of study under difficult conditions; carrying out a project no one else believed in; saving up to buy a house; standing their ground against a hostile person; defending themselves against injustice or bullying. Reliving these experiences, they often are surprised to realize that their strength has never left them. It is still there, albeit dormant and forgotten—a force for which they are proud and grateful. Just remembering it, they are moved.

To be strong—that is, competent, centered, resolute, able to face difficulties—is a good feeling. To be weak—distractible, fearful, apathetic—is not. This is obvious. Yet who teaches us to be strong? Very often I see the opposite. I see people who do not feel up to their task, who are overcome by anxiety, insecure, even torn inside. Perhaps they are endowed with wonderful creative talents, a great capacity for love, or superior intelligence. But they do not express them—for lack of inner strength. They are like a small boat at the mercy of waves, like a man moving slowly and tremulously and making big efforts just trudging along, a shadow of himself. They seem to have lost their way, and know not even where they want to go.

It can help to understand the strength we already have, and that which we can develop. Inner strength is a subtle and intelligent quality: we learn to read reality in other ways, use new strategies, forge our character, retrain forgotten abilities, change the way we relate, and tap our own resources. More important still, each of us is faced with a basic dilemma: Are the events of my life the result of forces over which I have no say, or can I in some way mold my existence? If I can see that my life is not governed by factors extraneous to me, but is, at least in part, decided in my inner world, I will find a surprising new strength. And I will realize that this strength originates in a faculty that is too often forgotten—a central function, often confused with thinking or impulse or emotion, but having its own distinct existence. This function is the will.

Let us see how this is so. The will chooses between right and wrong—thus is born responsibility. The will allows us to risk and to renew ourselves; to hold a thought through time, and realize a project. The will enables us to face difficulties and hardships without giving up straightaway. It gives us discipline. It makes our relationships with others truer and stronger. And it leads us toward freedom.

But if we delve into this subject long enough, we meet a paradox: The will is invisible, and for this reason we have been arguing for centuries. Is it real or not? It is at the source of our efficacy and our every decision. It constitutes our identity. Yet we do not know if it exists! And, depending on our conclusions, we read the world around us in completely different ways.

If we believe the will is an illusory idea, then everything obeys a script already written: how we behave in each situation, how we live our life. The delinquent who has just snatched a bag has a faulty brain; the student with poor results has no future; how and when we get sick has nothing to do with us; the thoughts that run through our head are just electrochemical processes for which we are not responsible. In short, we are made this way, and that is the end of the story.

If we believe instead in free will, we have, to be sure, many limitations, but ultimately our life is in our own hands; the thief can decide not to steal; the student can learn to use the skills he has; our health will be, to a fair extent, the result of our choices; the thoughts in our head we can manage ourselves; our harmful dependencies and habits are perhaps not as inevitable as they seem. And if we are "made that way," we can decide to change.

Not to acknowledge the will impoverishes and weakens us. To discover and cultivate it can offer huge advantages and produce great personal and social changes—with one caveat: The will is not a given. We do not start out strong and free. Countless factors condition us: our genetic makeup, our life circumstances, our history, other forces unknown to us, our own brain. The will is a conquest.

The will is for everybody. At certain times life may seem unfriendly to us. We may feel it has awarded others, and not us, with the most desirable gifts: health and wealth, talent and privilege; maybe contacts in high places. Mostly there is nothing we can do: what is, is, and what is not, is not. Yet one element surely depends on us, and it is the will. Even if we do not have it, we can generate it. We can learn to use it to our own and other people's advantage, turn it into an effective and creative tool. What others seem to have received for nothing, we can gain for ourselves bit by bit—then we shall feel it truly ours: not a lucky gift, but our very own victory. Nothing can be more democratic. With the will, we give shape to our lives.

It makes sense to speak of the dangers as well. The idea of the will is often associated with clumsy effort, pedantic discipline, or bullying. Even with feelings of omnipotence. But those are caricatures. True, this is a risky business: like all effective tools, inner strength might be applied in vile ways or for foul purposes. Anything worthwhile carries dangers. Recovering one's strength, however, is worth a try. In fact, it may be an impelling necessity for many. We need not remain passive, fearful, and confused. We need not be fragile. Inner strength simply means developing the resources needed for facing the hurdles and traps we are confronted with every day. From my forty years' experience as a psychotherapist, from a great amount of research-based knowledge in the fields of psychology and neuroscience, as well as from the inspiration offered by the myths and stories of diverse civilizations, I feel ready to say that this urgent task is workable for everyone.

We understand what strength is when we lack it. A few years ago I wrote a book on kindness. At the time it seemed to me the basic human principle. For me, kindness is synonymous with love. Warmth, affection, empathy, generosity—all ingredients of kindness, together with several others—I believed to be the qualities capable of transforming our lives, bringing well-being and fulfillment to all. I have not changed my mind. But I have realized more and more the pitfalls of fragility—how impotent we feel, how overcome we are by difficulties, how confused and angry we get when we have lost touch with our inner strength. Without it, we are in a state of emergency. And then love becomes meager and hesitant. A balanced and harmonious personality is founded on the development of both love and will.

To cultivate inner strength is a goal basic to our mental health. And it is the work of a lifetime. You will not find quick and miraculous recipes here. We do not acquire a new strength overnight. This task needs patience, and the humility to acknowledge our own weak points. In this undertaking, inner work is the way to go. No one is a static entity, and we can all develop potentialities we lacked before. This is a central theme of Roberto Assagioli's psychosynthesis: you will find references to him here and there, because various ideas expounded in this book originated from him. Ancient philosophies also talk of inner work: self-knowledge in the sense of reflection, exercise, and self-control. So do the Eastern traditions, which, as the way to self-transformation, recommend sadhana, that is, the daily practice of introspection and meditation.

In this book you will find an exercise at the end of each chapter. These exercises are based on introspection, visualization, breathing, reflection, writing, or concrete action. They are tools that, over years of work by my colleagues and me, have proved to be remarkably efficacious. The text and exercises together may be considered a course for activating the will. Familiarizing yourself with these exercises, and practicing them regularly, can bring insights, changes in perspective, and sometimes profound transformations.

The will is multiform. Each of its aspects empowers others. I have described them one by one in the various chapters of this book, and would like to illustrate them briefly.

1. Freedom

Feeling free is the number one prerequisite for health and happiness. We may feel captive to our own automatisms, obligations, and fears. Pressure from others may also oppress us. Freedom—or lack of freedom—colors every aspect of our existence.

In principle each of us is free. What we decide is our own choice. Our freedom is not a given, however, but must be won day after day. We can choose to embrace new ideas and new values, cultivate different interests, begin new activities, and develop new relationships. In other words, enlarge our range of choices or even radically change them. Are we up to the task?

2. Center

We cannot feel strong without finding in ourselves the place where tranquillity reigns, where we feel truly ourselves. When our emotions threaten to overwhelm and devastate us, we can find the center of our being. When we are subjected to intolerable pressures, in the midst of stress, in a nightmare predicament, we can retreat to an inner sanctuary where nothing disturbs, crushes, or distracts us. This discovery offers us a pristine feeling of freedom and serenity.

3. Will

The will is the central theme of this book. The absence of will makes our life tiring, bitter, sometimes impossible. We become slaves to others or victims of our own inertia, incapable of realizing anything we deem worthwhile. To rediscover our will is like breathing oxygen after a long apnea. We feel reborn, life takes a new direction, our strength returns. We have the feeling of being at the helm. Some say they feel more focused; others feel galvanized. What we will equals what we are, because through our choices we build our life, express ourselves in the world, and are known by others.

4. Plasticity

The capacity to give form to our existence is crucial, yet frequently underrated. We can illustrate it in this way: Imagine you are in a large, dark room. You have a torch that emits a strong beam of light. You direct it here and there, and from the darkness, various beings and shapes emerge—animals, people, machines, plants, statues, books, objects, and beings of every kind. Each time the light shines on one of these entities, it is illuminated, it exists; when the light shines elsewhere, that entity disappears. By directing our attention to aspects, interests, attitudes, and situations we have chosen, we give life to them, and thereby shape ourselves and our existence. Directing our attention like the light in the dark room, we call into being a new trait, interest, or activity. Or else we leave it in the dark.

5. Autonomy

To some extent we are all dependent and interdependent. But some are too much so. It becomes a way of being, and therefore a serious liability. They depend on other people, on food, substances, habits, objects. By doing so, they place their happiness in the hands of others—or leave it to chance. They live in a state of need and fear. They can be victims of blackmail and manipulation. The moment they are more autonomous, they can live a life that is truly their own. They are not obliged to trade their soul for an ounce of security or happiness. Finding autonomy means fending for ourselves. It is to discover in ourselves the source of our interests, tastes, and motivations.

6. Mastery

Our lifestyle in Western societies is based on immediate gratification. What I like, I want right now. This capricious impatience is typical of children, but also of adults who have never really grown up. We may let slip one word or gesture too many, we may act on an impulse and then regret it. It is hard to control ourselves and to wait. On the other hand, whatever we have no desire to do, we put off. A plethora of studies have shown that self-regulation is connected with self-confidence, health, and success.

To be at the mercy of impulses and whims is a dangerous state.

Self-mastery is a vital goal.

7. Integrity

Coherence within ourselves allows us to feel more solid. In an age marked by a lowering of standards, sloppiness, and getting by as a philosophy of life, integrity is a formidable asset.

But it has a cost. We commonly find ourselves having to choose between what is easier and what is right. We can pretend it does not matter, and choose the easy way. Or we can opt for the harder path, the one consistent with our values. For instance, we may choose to help someone in difficulty, to look at a dark side of ourselves, to confront an unpleasant task, to face a truth we would rather ignore, to take an unpopular stance, to tackle a huge hassle head-on. Integrity is about honoring our own values.

8. Depth

In the state of permanent distraction that pervades our contemporary life it is essential to learn anew the art of paying attention. Too often we flit from one interest (or activity, or relationship) to another, in the same way we surf the Web or change TV channels. We stay on the surface. We can learn instead to concentrate,

persevere, and get to the substance. Depth is will applied to thinking. Instead of skimming over a thought, we can penetrate and take possession of it. We dig deep till we find the vein of gold. To live in depth yields fulfillment. Why do we see so many bored faces, and why do so many people look for nonstop entertainment? It may be because they have not learned to make the effort to probe deep. This makes the difference between missing the point or getting to the gist of the matter, between being a dilettante or a maestro, between being bored and enjoying life.

9. Courage

Sometimes we feel engulfed by our own fears. As if it were our fears, apprehensions, and terrors that decided what was and wasn't permissible for us to do and to be. We fuss about health; we fear making a bad impression; we worry about impending failure; we dread losing control or getting lost. How many fears do we have? Usually we move within a comfort zone and avoid situations that may turn out to be tricky. As soon as we draw near a danger zone, an alarm goes off and we stop.

Risk, on the other hand, helps us grow and renew ourselves. It allows us to get out of the cramped space we live in and opens us to new and wider domains. It is a multiplier of possibilities. Are you ready to live a little more dangerously?

10. Resilience

Inner strength comes to light under hard circumstances. We may feel like giving up, but instead we find the capacity to start over again. The human ability to rise again after a catastrophe is great, and it has been decisive in our evolution. Resilience is to get up after falling down. It is the opposite of surrender. Above all, it is a different way of reading adversity and hindrance: not as unforgiving fate, but as challenge. Resilience is to believe that we can still manage, and strengthen ourselves through hardship and defeat.

11. The State of Grace

In certain exceptional moments we feel supported and guided by a force greater than ourselves. The boundaries of our being widen. Everything happens effortlessly, and with an ineffable feeling of lightness. These moments are rare and memorable. They can give us new strength and redefine our existence.

12. Odyssey

The last chapter of this book will be on The Odyssey. Odysseus, the hero, faces adversities, traps, monsters, dangers, even hostile gods. His companions die; he alone survives to return home. Homer's poem is the story of anyone who, through various trials, develops strength and intelligence and wins back her own self.

• • •

IN CULTIVATING inner strength we shall meet assets and propensities we already possess, because we have acquired them over the course of a long, stupendous evolution. For millennia we have exercised inner strength—struggling against all kinds of discomforts, enduring famine and risk of death, venturing into the unknown, risking our lives daily, attempting the impossible. Those who were not up to par did not survive. Those who did survive contributed to human evolution and transmitted to us infinitely precious gifts: the strength and intelligence they brought out in their tough trials now live in us. Paleontologists tell us there

were twenty-three different human species. Only one survived: Homo sapiens—the strongest. Us.

We now find ourselves, however, at a critical time. The will that helped us so much, we have largely forgotten. To rediscover it again, and to develop the qualities we lack, is an urgent task for anyone facing hardship. But even in normal situations—when we work, relate, play, reflect on our spiritual path, or seek a meaning in our lives—will is the central pivot.

The will is an ancient strength, but we can also think of it as new. For two important reasons: First, because many original studies on the will are now available—as compared to just a few years ago. They give us a clearer image of it, free it from stereotypes and old prejudices, and show it to us in all its power and beauty. Second, because newness is an intrinsic characteristic of the will. An emotion can repeat itself ad infinitum. A fantasy, too, can be old. And a thought may well be overcooked. But an act of will by definition is newevery single time; otherwise it would be a habit or an automatism. Newness is the very essence of the will.

To discover the will, to develop its qualities, is an urgent task for anyone facing ordinary or extraordinary hardship. But also in normal situations—when we work, relate, play, reflect on our spiritual path, or seek a meaning in our lives—the will is the central pivot.

If we do not have it, we cannot even get out of bed in the morning.

Before beginning, a few words about breathing. It is possible that at this very moment your breathing is not quite what it could be. Observe yourself: Are you breathing with only the upper part of your chest? This is an anxious breath, which in most people is chronic and inadequate. A baby breathes from the abdomen: This is the natural state. Try it yourself!

Deeper, calmer breathing brings more oxygen to the brain. Studies show that it lessens or removes anxiety and depression, helps us reason better, and promotes well-being.

Breath is a unique phenomenon, because it is at the interface between voluntary and involuntary action. Usually we breathe unawares, but we can also breathe voluntarily. Breath can help us understand the will. To take ten minutes a day for correct breathing is an act of will that can give many benefits and make the rest of the work described in this book easier and more fertile.

Exercise

Sitting with your eyes closed, breathe deeply. Breathe always through the nose. Place a hand over your abdomen: You should be able to feel its movement, out and in with the breath. It is important to create in the body a sensation of spaciousness. The abdomen expands, but so does the back, especially the part below the shoulder blades.

Now, as you breathe in, think of space: a very large natural space, a wide expanse. Then the immensity of cosmic space. The images do not have to be precise and constant. You need only the thought of expansion and vastness.

At the end of the out-breath, wait a few moments before breathing in again. The out-breath is a moment of relaxation and surrender. Let your body decide when to breathe in again.

PRACTICAL HINTS

It is essential that you do not force the breathing in any way. When you are distracted, calmly bring the

attention back to the breath. Be present to yourself while breathing. In everyday life, remember that you are a few breaths away from well-being.

FREEDOM

Once upon a time a highly intelligent bird was forced to live in a cage.

He reasoned and talked like a human being; he was a true phenomenon. His owner, a rich merchant, gave him every comfort. He wanted the bird all for himself: “Where would I find another exceptional animal like this one?” he thought. But the bird could no longer stand being imprisoned. Day and night, he dreamed of freedom.

One day the merchant said to everyone: “I am off to India. What present would you like me to bring you?” Relatives, friends, and servants all told him their wishes. The bird once more asked for freedom—the greatest gift. But since his wish was again denied, he asked his master to meet a bird who was his cousin in India. He explained where to find this bird, and asked the merchant that he give him his news. The merchant agreed, and managed to find the bird’s cousin. He was free, perched on a branch of a large tree. The merchant told the bird about his cousin. The bird listened attentively to every word. At the end he fluffed his feathers and, as if dead, suddenly fell to the ground.

The merchant was bewildered. When he returned home, he went to the caged bird and told him what had happened. This bird also listened with utmost attention; then he fluffed his feathers and finally collapsed to the ground. The master was crestfallen. He thought his words had upset the bird. Confused and distressed, he opened the cage, took the lifeless bird in his hands, and placed it on the windowsill. Suddenly the bird revived and flew off to the safety of a nearby tree.

He was free. “What happened?” asked the dismayed master. “Without knowing it,” answered the bird, “you brought me a priceless bit of advice. I played dead, and you gave me back my freedom.”

—RUMI

It is easy to understand the yearning of the bird in this story. Freedom, or lack of freedom, influences every aspect of our being. Chains of any kind cause bitterness or despair. Freedom increases our well-being and our strength (more on the smart bird later).

At times our freedom is limited or wiped out. I recall an episode from my boyhood: I was in a lift when the electricity went out, and I was blocked inside the elevator, in the dark. It was an oppressive state. I felt that my desire to get out, my need for space and liberty, met an inert, impersonal, irremovable reality. It was more than a fright: it was a feeling of total impotence.

I can think of some examples. You are on the freeway, and you have missed your exit. You are forced to drive to the next exit, many miles away. That stretch of road is useless, yet you are obliged to do it. You are forced to go in the direction opposite of the one you want, and resent every bit of it. Or you are at a boring meeting, but your role constrains you to stay. Or on the phone, having made a series of choices from a menu, you are waiting in a queue, and must not hang up lest you lose your turn—while having to listen to the same inane piece of music over and over again. These and many other examples are of short duration and (luckily) of modest importance, but they are enough for us to understand what it feels like when our freedom of choice and movement is frustrated. To be sure, in theory we are still free: we could run away, yelling, from the meeting; abandon the car on the freeway and walk; and so on. But we know too well that these alternatives are unpleasant, impractical, or illegal. And so we feel forced, and that constraint oppresses us.

Now extend this sense of constriction to a person's whole life. Some people have the impression that they are living in prison, as if throughout their entire existence, not merely in a brief episode, their freedom had vanished. They feel their work, their family life, their rest and holidays, their day-to-day living and the way they organize it, even their thoughts, are all heavily conditioned and controlled. It is like being a piece of machinery that moves inexorably without asking for assent, and having no alternatives. It is hell.

We all have a deep-seated need to feel free. Any harm, any restriction to this basic need, may cause suffering—anger, rebellion, anxiety, or depression. We feel we are living a life that is not ours. It is as if we were riding a roller coaster that climbs and falls, turns this way and that, without giving us a chance to get off, just throwing us about like a sack of potatoes.

On the other hand, we all know the taste of freedom. To be free feels good—it is a deep aspiration of our being. We know that without freedom we are not ourselves. "Libertà va cercando che è si cara." "He is looking for freedom so dear to him": with these famous words Dante describes himself in The Divine Comedy. His whole journey through Hell, through Purgatory, and up to the pinnacles of Heaven is nothing other than the search for freedom.

Considering how much the loss of freedom makes us suffer, we could even say that it is at the origin of all our pain. Freedom is linked most deeply to our identity, because to be free means to be oneself: destroy the freedom and you obliterate the person. Only as free individuals are we able to manifest who we are.

Unfortunately, humanity has from time immemorial developed ways to limit or suppress freedom. Yes, we are contradictory: besides wanting freedom, we fear it—our own and that of others. Freedom means to be unpredictable, and thus possibly to make unpleasant, dangerous, or mistaken choices; to evoke ideas or behaviors that are incompatible with those of the social consensus; perhaps to create havoc. Some people prefer to be slaves—in one of the many possible ways of being a slave: they have no responsibility, take no risks. It is possible to forget about freedom and live in bondage forever without even realizing it. Not only does freedom vanish—the very idea of freedom disappears. But the unease remains: it becomes mute and opaque, yet ever disturbing.

The lack of freedom can be felt in many ways. We would need a whole book to examine and discuss them. A simple yes or no certainly cannot answer the question of whether or not we are free. It is a matter of various degrees of independence, and of different areas of our lives: We can be free in one area, but less so in another. We can feel constriction on the plane of action, thought, emotion, or relationships. Greek mythology, so clever at showing our pathologies through stories and metaphors, has much to teach us here. Let us look at a few examples.

Daedalus was the creator of the labyrinth—once you were inside, it was impossible to get out. The maze was so complex that one would have to wander through it for eternity, although a way out was, in theory, possible. King Minos had Daedalus imprisoned in the labyrinth—his own creation—because he did not want him to disclose the secret to anyone else. Daedalus perhaps would have known how to escape, but the sea all around the island of Crete was under surveillance, so he would have been caught immediately. The only possible way out was to fly. Thus he made himself wings out of bird feathers and wax, and flew away, free (his son, Icarus, misused his freedom and fell into the sea). Daedalus is the symbol for being able to transcend the self-created maze of our own mind.

Midas the king thought only of gold. Excessively greedy, he had obtained the power of turning everything he touched to gold—but the gift he at first thought was wonderful soon became a devastating encumbrance. His life was paralyzed. Thus our desires imprison us, and we are unable to see beyond them. We become obsessed, we see the world only in terms of what we want. The story ends well: King Midas was finally

granted to find liberation from the spell. He immersed and purified himself in a river, which since that day glistens with a golden light.

Procrustes wished to fit the people he hosted to his ill-famed bed. If they were too tall, he would cut off their feet; if they were too small, he would stretch them on the rack. Here is the imposition of conformity—the unpleasant sensation of having to adapt to ideas and ways that do not belong to us; to be forced to live by other people's measures. Another example: Sisyphus was condemned to carry a boulder to the top of a mountain; from there the boulder would roll down, and he would have to carry it back up again. This is the coercion of endless, futile repetition. The punishment for Echo the nymph, instead, was the compulsion to repeat the last words spoken by others: the incapacity to express ideas of her own.

We could cite many more. But the freedom underlying all freedoms is the freedom of the will. With it we express who we are. Can we call ourselves free? In theory the answer is a happy yes. Freedom is an extraordinary achievement of our civilization. All modern civilized societies are founded on the respect of everyone's freedom. For basic decisions—for instance, the decision to marry—the presupposition of free will is crucial: "I do" is a choice you will never forget, and it had better be a free one when you pronounce it! It is celebrated before society and recognized as such. So, too, for economic decisions: The signature on a check, for example, seals a free choice by which an individual gives money to another in exchange for service or goods. The signature on a contract is a ritualized way of affirming the freedom of the will. The same applies to political decisions; when we enter the voting booth, we are alone. Nobody is allowed to disturb us: no pressure, no obligation. We are free citizens.

A yes before a priest or mayor, the cross on the voting card in the silence and solitude of the booth, the signature on a check or contract: these are all ways of saying that our free will is honored and protected. We can choose what we think is best. And we are free to do so.

So, at least as far as our main choices are concerned, we give enormous importance to freedom. It makes perfect sense that a signature and proof of identity are often required. We are, so to speak, more ourselves in the moment we make a free decision than at any other time.

We take free will very seriously—and rightly so. If it is in any way threatened, an alarm goes off. Just try to hold someone in your home, to get money or sexual favors from another person against her will; to falsify an electoral result or forge a signature on a check or contract: all hell breaks loose, and rightly so. To violate another person's will is a crime, sometimes of the vilest sort.

But are we sure the will is actually present and active? The existence or absence of free will is a central legal theme. Article 85 of the Italian Penal Code says that "no one may be punished for an act considered by law a crime, if at the moment he committed it he was not responsible," and specifies: "One is responsible if he has the capacity to be conscious and to will." In Anglo-Saxon legislation it is said that the criminal must have mens rea, that is, both the awareness that she is committing a crime and the intention to commit it.

There are also degrees of seriousness, which correspond to degrees of active will. A crime is gravest when it is premeditated and planned (with malice aforethought in American law: planned and with malicious intent). When instead the crime is committed without premeditation, or is marked by violence or hostility but with no deliberate intention to harm, then it is thought to be less grave (second-degree murder in the United States) but still a crime.

In recent times neuroscience has often been cited in courtrooms precisely as a means to ascertain whether, and to what degree, an act has been voluntary. The years between 2005 and 2009 saw a doubling of the number of trials in which evidence was drawn from neuroscience or genetics. Take the case of a fifty-year-old man who, after a life of honest work and exemplary behavior, began to collect pedophiliac photos,

molested his stepdaughter, and exhibited an aggressive, hypersexual demeanor. It was then discovered he had a brain tumor that was pressing against the amygdala. Once the tumor was removed, the problem disappeared; when the tumor grew back, the problem returned. In his trial for pedophilia, the many extenuating circumstances were acknowledged. But he was not fully acquitted, as he had downloaded the photos only when at home, never at work: the impulse could not have been irresistible if, having in mind the purpose of not being found out, he could deliberately delay gratification in order not to be caught.

How much of our behavior is determined by the condition of our brain? Not an easy question to answer. The Royal Society has suggested that lawyers and judges take courses in neuroscience. In these matters we must beware of hasty conclusions and simplistic stances. This is a highly complex subject that shows how touchy, unpredictable, and multifaceted the issue of free will is. Still, for the time being, the basic old formula remains: for a crime to be punishable, it must be demonstrated not only that damage was done, but also that it was intentional.

Individual free will is protected, celebrated, honored, and acknowledged. This is what happens in a free society. In a democracy we are not subjected to limitations of our will, unless our actions could harm or interfere with other people’s freedom and well-being. Anti-freedom methods that were adopted in the past, and are still enforced in some societies, were luckily abandoned long ago: torture; arbitrary imprisonment; excessive police control; the imposition of a specific way of life, habits, even clothing, food, music, and so on. This is a great victory for our civilization, a conquest we must never take for granted, but must honor at all times.

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