

Can we control our mind?

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I invite you to guess who said the following.

I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do...it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

So what's your guess? A follower of Sigmund Freud who happens to be a devout Christian?

Close, but no cigar. Those are the words of the Apostle Paul, written about 1850 years before Freud. The passage is Romans 7.14-25 — an excerpt from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, as quoted in the NRSV.

Both Paul and Sigmund Freud viewed human nature as infused with undesirable and destructive propensities that we can't readily control. As a result, for 2000 years, now, a prominent theme of Christianity has been that civilization is decadent and is in a headlong rush to self-destruction. The theory of Freud may be viewed as explaining why this seemingly inevitable result has not yet occurred. Freud may be understood as an indirect follower of the Apostle Paul in terms of psychological theory due to the pervasive influence of Christianity on European civilization.

But is the perspective of Paul and Freud accurate? Is a person, in essence, a ship at sea, being blown this way and that by their body and their mind? If this were true, how could individuals mature to lead productive lives? And how could civilization achieve so much in the realms of economic development, technological development, social development, and political development? Does all this achievement come only as a result of overcoming or suppressing our true nature?

Meeting format

Let's discuss the foregoing questions, and in the process I'll present my model of the mind in order to clarify what Paul and Freud were confused about. In addition, I'll explain some studies of animals that show that baboons have less volitional control than do chimps, and that chimps have less volitional control than do humans.