

Futureselves

Free Will, the Self, and the Science of Living Well

By

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This book first published 2023

Ethics International Press Ltd, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Print Book ISBN: 978-1-80441-113-1

eBook ISBN: 978-1-80441-114-8

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Preface

Life is about being and becoming – Carl Rogers

What matters in life? Is it your past achievements, being mindful of the present, and grateful for your current experience? Or is what matters the attainment of a better version of yourself, achieving new goals, and constant progress? As a psychologist working with business teams and people in leadership positions, I have often felt the tension between encouraging my clients to be more focused on the present and the alternative benefit derived from articulating clear goals toward a more fulfilling and rewarding life. I am all too aware of the psychological problems that arise when people are lost in tomorrow. They put excessive pressure on themselves to perform, resulting from a desire for perfection and a feeling of never being satisfied. Alternatively, while being mindful and living in the present may benefit outcomes like stress reduction and increased focus, mindfulness is not enough to drive optimal performance.

There is a middle ground between being present and having a future focus. Psychological wellness is achieving a sweet spot of blending aspiration for what one can be, with satisfaction and gratitude for one's current position in life, while maintaining compassion, respect, and admiration for others. Applied psychology is a discipline that aims to help people live a satisfying life without compromising external achievements or compromising the feeling of living a meaningful life. Psychology concurrently aims to increase self-awareness, understanding of oneself, and self-acceptance. Achieving these goals requires a deep appreciation of the nature of the self and an understanding that well-established Futureselves (mental images of ourselves in the future) can facilitate the attainment of a life of meaning while not expensing compassion and self-acceptance.

The application of the concept of Futureselves started with two separate doctoral dissertations on the impact of unemployment—my work on helping young people rethink the importance they placed on their careers and the work of Geoff Plimmer, who aimed to help the unemployed bring meaning back to their lives. The year was 1997, and trends that seem

relevant today, such as rising unemployment due to automation and the relationship between work hours and productivity, were beginning to be discussed in New Zealand. Since 1984, the New Zealand economy had been going through a process of liberalisation and free-market policies that meant many people were losing their jobs just at the time they hoped to be earning high salaries for their retirement. My idea—to apply a concept related to representations people have of themselves in the future to help them shape their lives across multiple domains—resonated with Geoff's focus on assisting people in adjusting to changes in mid-life. Together, we developed the Futureselves interventions. A partnership was born to bring a new perspective to the psychology of career choice and self-development.

In late 2015, I mentioned to Geoff that it would be timely for us to write a book about our work in the field of Futureselves. Given the prevalence of research applying concepts of the self in the future to issues such as financial planning, prosocial behaviours, and self-development, the timing for *Futureselves* seemed right. Geoff mentioned that while he did not have the time to commit to writing a book on the topic, he was happy to advise and support me through the project. His first challenge was asking me to defend the merits of writing a book on Futureselves.

Geoff and I debated extensively about the value of me writing this book. As practising academics, we had reservations about being responsible for yet another text that attempted to explain psychology's practical application in an overly commercialised market. We agreed that the value of psychology, more specifically applied psychology, is the application of science to improve the experience of living. We wanted to avoid inflated promises that came from unsubstantiated theories and techniques that had no evidence base. Geoff and I did not want to see a book that failed to give credit to the science at the foundation of our work on Futureselves. The science had to be as important as the desire to help.

Many psychotherapeutic approaches are designed with good intentions but have no, or even negative, consequences. Many interventions lack empirical support. Any book that I was to write on our approach to self-development had to review the science and philosophical underpinnings that are the foundation of our thinking. The promotion of a self-development technique should be the outcome of extensive discussion on the science of human

development. Any book covering our thinking on self-development should discuss the potential limitations of self-help when compared to guided assistance, be that assistance from a trusted friend or a helping professional.

There is a lot of relevant research related to self-development that is useful for non-academics and psychologists to know. Examples include the widespread application of narrative identity theory, the increasing work on the future self and its role in directing behaviour, and the growth in neuroscience and neuroendocrinology challenging long-held beliefs on free will. I believed these threads could be combined while recognising contributions of the past to establish a contemporary evidence-based approach to self-development. Such an approach to self-development would discuss the nature of the self while giving prominence to the role of Futureselves in the study of human behaviour, psychotherapy, and self-directed psychological interventions. The result is *Futureselves*, a book that attempts to blend theory with application. It aims to take you on a journey of understanding the thinking behind operationalising a contemporary, science-based notion of the self with practical application.

Geoff and I see ourselves as psychologists who do not merely practice and write academic articles. We aim to have a substantial impact, in our small way, on making the world a better place. We have a clear picture of ourselves in the future, and we hope that our work can make a difference in more people's lives. The ideas that we research and that you will read about in this book have profoundly impacted our life journey. They have shaped us into the people we are and helped us make meaningful change with those we have worked. Our work in the field is very much a joint effort spanning many years.

Living a meaningful life is central to the human experience and a marker of psychological wellbeing. We hope that *Futureselves* will provide philosophical, scientific, and actionable frameworks that enhance self-development. We hope these frameworks will help academics, psychologists, helping professionals, and those engaged in self-directed self-development, understand the role that compelling Futureselves have in creating a meaningful life.

A Guide to Futureselves

Futureselves is the experience of thinking and feeling about oneself in the future. Everyone has Futureselves. People would find it impossible to live without representations of themselves in the future because Futureselves are inherent in the way the brain functions. People who have well-developed Futureselves are, however, likely to have an increased sense of agency, which leads to a purposeful life and improved psychological wellbeing¹. Put another way, by having a clear vision of one's self in the future, a person is likely to find meaning in the pursuit of that future. Futureselves are, therefore, a central road to mental wellness and a feeling of fulfilment.

Self-development is the process of moving into the future and progressing toward an improved version of one's self. In line with this definition, Futureselves is the science of self-development, bringing to the forefront our attention that the future, not the past, is where one's focus should reside if one wants to maximise their human potential.

The problem is that not everyone is aware of their Futureselves. Few people have gone through a systematic process of defining appropriate Futureselves to guide their life. As a result, many people do not benefit from the sense of purpose and agency that arises from conscious awareness of well-formulated Futureselves.

The basis for Futureselves

Futureselves are central to our human experience and govern what we attend to, what we become, and how we define ourselves. Futureselves are at the heart of the science of the human experience. To understand how this science translates into a philosophy for living, we must look to the

¹ Tanno, K., Sakata, K., Ohsawa, M., Onoda, T., Itai, K., Yaegashi, Y., ... & JACC Study Group. (2009). Associations of ikigai as a positive psychological factor with all-cause mortality and cause-specific mortality among middle-aged and elderly Japanese people: findings from the Japan Collaborative Cohort Study. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 67(1), 67-75.

psychologists and philosophers who have incorporated the core idea of Futureselves into psychological theory and therapy. As you will learn in this book, Futureselves is not a new concept; instead, it is a concept that has a long history. Futureselves have long contributed to our understanding of what it means to be human. Psychologists have known about the potential benefits of the application of Futureselves within psychological interventions for well over a century.

The journey toward Futureselves should be systematic and grounded in self-knowledge and self-acceptance, two things that are critical to creating meaning and fulfillment in one's life. The self-development journey begins with acquiring the knowledge of what a person is and what they can become. This book will first explore what it means to have a self so as to provide a solid foundation for your journey towards understanding and applying Futureselves. I will then discuss Futureselves in the context of history, neuroscience, pharmacology, and evolution before moving on to the practical application of Futureselves for self-development.

Part one: Defining the self

To understand Futureselves, one must first appreciate the nature of the self. Many self-help and applied psychology books gloss over conversations about the self for good reasons. Despite being the foundation of human psychology, defining the self is a rabbit hole in which few dare to plunge. Discussions of the self invariably touch on notions of what it means to be human, giving rise to questions about beliefs, the benefit and role of meritocracy, and how to implement justice. These are merely three of the curly issues related to the self that many psychologists prefer to overlook.

If I have any hope of conveying what Futureselves are and how they might unlock the key to self-development, I must, however, start by defining the notion of a self. Rather than ignore what the self may or may not be, I need to address philosophical and scientific questions head-on and provide a definition of the self that is fit for the purpose of providing people with a sense of control in their life and charting a course toward an ideal state.

The time has come for the psychology of self-development to acknowledge and accept the nature of the self. Continuing to avoid these issues is to do a disservice to the discipline and mislead practitioners and those hoping to apply psychological principles to improve their lives. Without defining the self, a psychological theory is without foundation. Any theory applied to self-development presupposes what the self is and how the self operates. A model of the self is the foundation of self-development, and readers require an explicit definition of the self to examine the foundation of any self-development theory.

Free will and consciousness

Futureselves adopts the radical but well-supported notion that the self is without free will. Given the theory draws on over a century of work on the self of the future, paradoxically, Futureselves is heavily influenced by recent neuroscience, indicating the absence of a self in the traditional sense while maintaining a focus on the practical outcome of enhancing self-development. Futureselves will attempt to explain why free will is unlikely and what this means for self-development—turning attention away from free will as an essential component of self-development and refocus the discussion on the role of meaning and happiness. I will argue that life outcomes like meaning are not dependent on free will but are reliant on a sense of agency, which is vital to psychological health and growth. Crossing the paradox of free will is mentally challenging. Many significant scientific breakthroughs have nevertheless come through embracing seemingly contradictory ideas and the adoption of a paradox mindset². I believe one can best understand the concept of free will by embracing the paradox between the experience of living and the reality of life, an idea I will discuss in this book.

I will present the idea that the self is best understood through reference to two perspectives—a subjective self, the 'I' that has the appearance of thinking and has the feeling of responsibility for doing, and the objective

² Heracleous, L., & Robson, D. (2020, November 12). *Why the 'paradox mindset' is the key to success*. BBC Worklife. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201109-why-the-paradox-mindset-is-the-key-to-success>

self, the 'Me' that is more of an object acting in the world. Being able to distinguish between the subjective and objective self is crucial to understanding the nature of the self. The difference manifests in the reality of the self as a biological object being separate from the conscious experience one has of one's life. Part One of this book will argue that recognising these two ways of understanding the self has implications for how one can think about self-development. These implications give rise to the importance of one being consciously aware of their Futureselves.

Part two: The basis for Futureselves

Scientific markers

At its foundation, psychology is an extension and application of neuroscience. Any psychological theory aiming to be more than just an idea must have a connection to neuroscience. Knowing the scientific nature of the self is vital for developing a scientific approach to personal development. A scientific approach is more than wishful thinking. It reflects how humans experience growth, why this growth is meaningful, and how the sense of meaning is at the heart of significant positive psychological outcomes.

There appears to be an underlying brain mechanism that links Futureselves to action, and this provides more substantial neurological support for the idea of Futureselves and how best to activate them for behavioural change. To be a robust scientific theory, Futureselves needs to demonstrate evolutionary adaptability, as well as be able to be described by neurological processes. While it is beyond this book's scope to delve deep into neuroscience, I need to define some key terms used in neuroscience to help the reader better understands the neurological base of Futureselves.

The history of psychology

As a psychological paradigm, Futureselves is not new. The heavy intellectual lifting of psychologists who have come before me provides much of the scientific backing for the Futureselves framework. As an

applied psychologist, I implement existing research-supported theory into novel frameworks to solve modern problems. A lineage of thought on the importance of the self of the future is easily recognisable by examining related theories that precede Futureselves. Therefore, I discuss the work of past psychologists and provide background on conceptualisations of the self of the future. I stand on the shoulders of giants in the field in drawing lines of thought together when looking at the central role that Futureselves has in psychology.

Possible selves

Having discussed some of the research and theory that underpins Futureselves, I turn attention to a model of the self in the future that is most applicable to self-development—possible selves. The theory of possible selves is one of the most useful frameworks for understanding the self in the future. By combining possible selves with theoretical aspects from other frameworks that discuss a self in the future, I aim to build a comprehensive approach to personal development, which I term the *Futureselves framework*.

Before I get into the process by which Futureselves aids self-development, I will take a step back and review the extensive body of work on possible selves which underpins the application of Futureselves. I draw primarily on the theory of possible selves to advance an approach to self-development consistent with the reality of the self and the empirical evidence on achieving desired future states. To complete my objectives, I will supplement research and theory on possible selves and other self-development theories with psychological findings on motivation, goal setting, and performance psychology.

Part three: The Futureselves framework

The remainder of the book is about how to use the Futureselves framework to develop compelling goals that capture the type of life a person wants and help create a sense of agency that will result in enhanced wellbeing. The development of the Futureselves framework for personal growth has four parts.

The first part is to explore what Futureselves to pursue. Before one can define their Futureselves, one must engage in deep and considered introspection on what matters in their life, individual differences, and the significant influence of past life events on what a person wishes to become. There is a systematic way of exploring one's past and present to establish Futureselves. I cover some fundamental techniques that I have found helpful in my practice. These techniques are at the base of the Futureselves framework.

The second part of the Futureselves approach is selecting and elaborating compelling Futureselves that will form goal states to pursue. Comprehensive goal states, represented as Futureselves, will cover life domains like family and work. Futureselves are vivid, detailed, and associated with emotions and relationships to significant people in one's life. I will discuss the importance of examining the perceived likelihood one has of achieving their Futureselves and the central role that hopes and fears, together with the related likelihood of realising these hopes and fears, have on how Futureselves drive self-development.

Having defined suitable Futureselves that one will pursue, one is then ready to look at how to turn these Futureselves into goals. The third part of the Futureselves approach covers how to set goals that lead to successful outcomes and create behavioural patterns that ensure one is consistently making progress toward one's Futureselves. Behavioural patterns, not free will, are crucial to achieving desired future states.

Obtaining Futureselves is difficult. Those who commit to their Futureselves will likely face many challenges and obstacles as they attempt to achieve their desired states. Therefore, the final part of the Futureselves framework covers techniques people can use when the journey towards their Futureselves becomes difficult. I look at ways people can overcome feelings of doubt to stay on course toward their hoped-for future.

How to use this book

Applied psychology is the process of taking evidence-based techniques and sound theory to provide people with tools and frameworks they can

use to make the changes they need or want to enhance their life. With a basis in psychology, self-help literature often shares this aim of wanting to improve people's lives. Still, even as theories are expounded and publishers release titles claiming to facilitate wellness and fulfilment, psychological health for many continues to deteriorate. Depression is on the rise within specific cohorts, and anxiety is increasing³, resulting in many people who have overdosed on self-help with little to show for their addiction.

Futureselves is not strictly a psychological text and is certainly not what one would consider standard self-help. With the explosion of science, theory, and practice pertaining to the self of the future in the past twenty years, there is now a need to connect past theory and research with the present to provide an integrated model of Futureselves. This integration involves linking psychological research on the self of the future with a modern approach to the process of self-development. *Futureselves* attempts to combine both the science and practice of psychology to present a framework for living a meaningful life by having a clear purpose, leading ultimately to improved psychological wellness.

Futureselves has the somewhat ambitious aim of being both a guide for developing a self-directed intervention (i.e., self-help) and a text that a helping professional, such as psychotherapists, can use to integrate concepts related to Futureselves into their practice. I have long felt that the divide between the popular press and psychotherapy has done an extreme disservice to helping professionals and those undertaking a self-directed approach to self-development. If there is a science to self-development, then this science should not only be the domain of helping professionals. While I am firmly in favour of people working with a trained professional to achieve their goals, this is not always possible or feasible. Scientific self-development should not be the luxury of the privileged few.

³ Patalay, P., & Gage, S. H. (2019). Changes in millennial adolescent mental health and health-related behaviours over 10 years: a population cohort comparison study. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 48(5), 1650-1664.

Reading for interest & application

While my preference is that all readers will want to read the book cover to cover, the reality is that some sections of the book are more applicable to certain types of readers.

Part One of the book is especially relevant to academics and those wanting to appreciate the arguments for the absence of free will and definitions of the self. Some readers will find the notion of the absence of free will as being core to the science of self-development a contradictory idea. Working through that paradox takes time, so don't worry if, on first reading, you find discussions of the self a bit confusing. What I aim to do is build our shared understanding of the self from a scientific foundation. My goal is to establish the case for the importance of self-development while highlighting that it is the feeling of self-development, not the self, as a causal force that is the crucial factor to improving one's quality of life.

Part Two is perhaps of most interest to academics and curious practitioners interested in the supporting evidence for Futureselves in neuroscience, evolution, and cognitive psychology. In this section, I delve into the evidence that supports Futureselves being more than just a theory with practical application.

For practitioners, and those purely interested in the application of Futureselves, either in their practice or for self-direct self-development, you may, however, wish to move directly to Part Three of the book. This section covers the application of Futureselves and discusses a framework for integrating Futureselves into psychotherapies and general self-development. Readers that have their interest in the theory behind Futureselves sparked by reading the practice section may wish to read earlier sections of the book to delve more deeply into the underlying theory.

The key takeaway is that one can read *Futureselves* in a modular fashion. While there are links between each part of the book, the chapters' structure is such that readers can go directly to the section most relevant to their interest in Futureselves.

Given that I have written *Futureselves* to appeal to a broad audience, the text interchanges first and third person. The purpose of this is to clarify that the methodologies discussed are applicable for both self-development and for helping professionals who guide others toward their Futureselves. The book also contains a range of case studies from my practice as a psychologist. I have changed all names in the case studies, modified cases, and removed identifiers.

References

I have provided references sparingly to direct readers to source text for key points made. As the intended audience for *Futureselves* includes practitioners, academics, and those interested in self-directed self-development, I have followed a hybrid method of referencing:

- A reference is used only once in a given paragraph or section, indicating where a passage of work or series of ideas has originated.
- I have not provided references for general concepts discussed, such as biological definitions.
- I have not referenced my PhD. However, I have derived and retrieved much of the work on the self and possible selves from my thesis.
- I have provided references where I have cited specific studies or quotes.
- While most references are academic, where appropriate, I have included articles from non-academic sources. The criteria I have used for non-academic references is where the source is credible (such as scientific magazines), or practical (relating Futureselves to self-development), or where I believe the substance of the research or ideas is well covered.

I hope that I have found a happy medium with the referencing, but I am sure there might be too much for some readers and not enough for others. For those interested in more studies related to Futureselves, I have set up a

dedicated website to capture essential work in the area. The website has links to the research and research labs involved in the work on Futureselves or topics related to the self in the future. The website is www.futureselveslab.com.

PART 1:
DEFINING THE SELF

Section 1: Free Will & Self Development

You see, you were born; Born, born to be alive

– Patrick Hernandez, “Born to Be Alive.”

Summary

Up to this point in your life, you may have never questioned the reality that you are free and freely created the person you have become. I believe the reality of that freedom is an illusion. More specifically, even discussing the notion of free will being an illusion (i.e., a misinterpreted perception of a sensory experience) may be nonsensical. A deeper examination of our experience makes apparent key causal aspects to the nature of life and the physics that govern the universe. I also think that understanding and accepting the true nature of that illusion has important implications for psychological health, self-development, and ultimately how society should function to maximise the human experience for all.

Self-development has a long history of promoting the importance of a person having the right ideas. An idea that I believe to be right is that the self may not need to be free for self-development to be beneficial. My view is it may be more helpful in the long run for both individuals and society to have an accurate understanding of the self grounded in science. If free will is an illusion, then the importance of a scientific and mechanical approach to self-development, which also encapsulates an individualised and systematic approach to therapy, becomes critical. Moreover, if free will is an illusion, then creating environments that stimulate individual self-development is of central importance if psychological interventions are to facilitate positive outcomes for individuals and society to impact lives in the long term.

Futureselves & the absence of free will

The non-existence of free will is a core idea within the Futureselves approach. In the context of self-development, this idea places importance

on how data enters the brain, how encoding occurs, turning data into information, and how this information ultimately drives behaviour.

The alternate theory is to focus on free will as the cause of human behaviour. A focus on the power of free will presumes the self is capable of willing choice into being. Self-development becomes simply a matter of willing the right decisions. As Futureselves denies the existence of free will, it must approach self-development differently. It places more substantial reliance on understanding how the brain processes information to create the illusion of choice.

Science indicates the possibility that people are not free in the sense of an 'I' being able to make decisions. The potential that thought and behaviour are determined has led people to fear that the admission of a loss of free will can result in nihilism and less concern for others¹. The worry is that people will not take an interest in their own lives and live without self-defined goals², resulting in a life lived with a loss of meaning³.

Recent research indicates that previous findings may have overstated the relationship between free will and a decline in morality. Evidence suggests any connection between the denial of free will and immoral behaviour may be limited⁴. Accepting that people have limited or no free will does not need to result in a reduction in the purpose they have for their life. On the contrary, the need to establish a purpose in life may be even more critical in the absence of free will. The concepts of free will and establishing purpose in life are not mutually dependent as some would have you believe⁵.

¹ Cf. Vohs, K. D., & Schooler, J. W. (2008). The value of believing in free will: Encouraging a belief in determinism increases cheating. *Psychological Science*, 19(1), 49-54.

² Heyman, G. M. (2009). *Addiction: A disorder of choice*. Harvard University Press.

³ Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). The darker and brighter sides of human existence: Basic psychological needs as a unifying concept. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 319-338.

⁴ Crone, D. L., & Levy, N. L. (2019). Are free will believers nicer people? (Four studies suggest not). *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 10(5), 612-619.

⁵ Cf. Pereboom, D. (2014). *Free will, agency, and meaning in life*. Oxford University Press.

Appropriately maintaining the illusion of free will is indeed central to connecting you with your Futureselves in a way that builds meaning. This meaning, however, is derived from a sense of agency that leads to the experience of behavioural change while still accepting one's objective self. People fear if they accept the illusion of free will, they will sink into nihilism or despair. I believe this is unfounded. In the end, what will matter to a person is the experience of living an experience achieved through the inescapable state of being conscious.

The irony of understanding that you are not free while acting as if you are free gives rise to the importance of being aware of your Futureselves. Enhancing the *feeling* of a sense of agency through the pursuit of Futureselves is vital for psychological health, independent of the true nature of free will.

Living with the illusion

The psychology of self-development aims to see if one can work out a system that facilitates the act of living. The intent is to help make life a pleasurable and meaningful process rather than a painful ordeal. Freedom is not central to what it means to be a self, and the idea of free will may have limited importance when discussing self-development. Even with little or no free will, you can live a meaningful and happy life, a life that leads to greater psychological wellness when compared to an alternative existence. What is critical is that you have the feeling, real or otherwise, of creating your life. Freedom may not matter, but what does is the way a person lives their unique life. Freedom is not what defines self-development.

Using illusions to our advantage

Free will is just one of the many illusions that human beings maintain. Our brain is continually constructing the world from the data we perceive. We hold many sensory illusions because they help us negotiate our environment and help us exist as members of a group. By framing our understanding of free will in the same way as other illusions, we can benefit from neuroscience while harnessing the paradox that the experience of the life that we enjoy is an illusion; we act as if we are

controlling our life, in turn enhancing our life experience, while knowing that free will is illusory.

By way of example, I draw your attention to the Helmholtz illusion: a square composed of horizontal lines appears taller and more narrow than an identical square made up of vertical lines. To see the effect for yourself, look at the two squares in Figure 1⁶ and ask yourself which square looks wider.

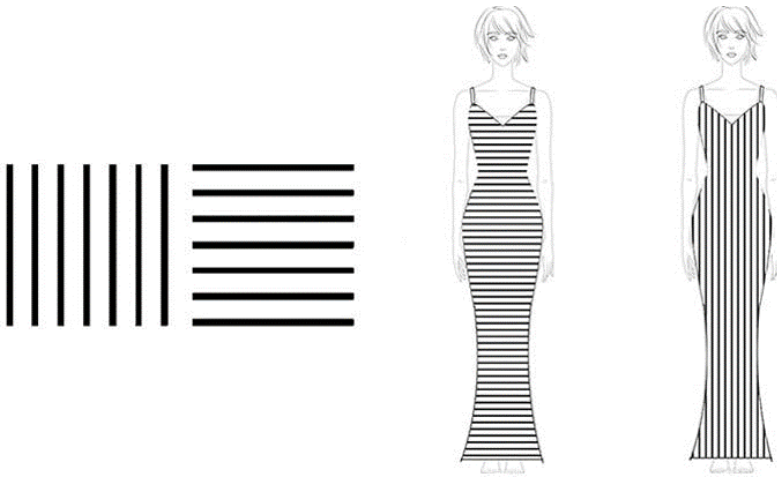


Figure 1: *Example of the Helmholtz illusion*

After examining the squares, look at the image of the two women on the right and ask yourself the same question in reverse. Which woman looks slimmer? Many people report that a square with vertical stripes appears too wide, and a square with horizontal stripes appears too tall. Many people report that a dress with horizontal stripes will make a person appear slimmer than a dress with vertical lines.

We can draw many analogies from this simple illusion to understand the significance of the illusion of free will for self-development. As with most visual illusions, knowing the Helmholtz illusion does not change your experience of the illusion. I believe this to be the first of three critical

⁶ The above image was presented by Dr Kim Ransley as part of the Sydney Design Festival on 8 March 2019 (<https://theconversation.com/why-visual-illusions-appear-in-everyday-objects-from-nature-to-architecture-111178>)

points to help you accept the illusion of free will. Understanding the illusion of free will is unlikely to mean that you disassociate from life. On the contrary, knowing the illusion will not mean that you consciously live with the knowledge that your sense of free will is illusory. It is simply not possible to operate outside the illusion due to the brain's supporting mechanisms that reinforce your sense of free will. You can't help but feel free.

Secondly, knowing the illusion will open you up to a greater acceptance of reality. Wearing clothes with horizontal lines does not make one thinner, and research shows the limitation of the Helmholtz illusion in real people—the effect of the illusion depends on size⁷. The illusion only makes one look thinner when one is already slim⁸. Knowing that you are experiencing an illusion is helpful in that it keeps us grounded in reality. One does not get lost in the illusion and make detrimental conclusions, such as believing that wearing a top with appropriate lines will make one more fit.

Likewise, understanding the illusion of free will means that one can attribute cause and effect correctly in their life and not solely blame themselves or others when life does not turn out as expected. Failure will not necessarily lead to unhappiness. Fortune will not lead one to believe they are masters of their fate, nor blame others less fortunate. Instead, when we understand how events come to pass more fully, our reaction to such events will be one of understanding, gratitude, and compassion for ourselves and others.

There is an asymmetry between free will's connection with love and hate. Love doesn't require attribution to the individual. It requires that you care about a person's suffering and happiness and that you find pleasure in their company. It doesn't require that they are the cause. However, with hate, one requires personal attribution for behaviour that is difficult to maintain in the absence of free will. Thus acknowledging the illusion of free will not

⁷ Thompson, P., & Mikellidou, K. (2011). Applying the Helmholtz illusion to fashion: horizontal stripes won't make you look fatter. *i-Perception*, 2(1), 69-76.

⁸ Ashida, H., Kuraguchi, K., & Miyoshi, K. (2013). Helmholtz illusion makes you look fit only when you are already fit, but not for everyone. *i-Perception*, 4(5), 347-351.

only increases compassion and minimises pride, but it also decreases hate without affecting a person's ability to love⁹.

Thirdly, and most important for the topic of self-development, we can use the illusion to our advantage. While losing weight, we may want to try and wear slimming outfits, while in line with point two, continue to impact reality by actually losing weight and becoming healthier. We can harness the illusion to achieve real-world outcomes. Knowing that free will is an illusion is helpful. It will encourage a person to engage in the most constructive behaviours required to help them reach their Futureselves. Examples of the refocus gained through accepting the illusion of free will include changing one's environment rather than always resorting to increased willpower as a means to increase the likelihood that goal-oriented behaviour will occur.

Ideas and the experience of living

Despite the illusion of free will, the reality is that you are likely to be entirely passive in the process of life. So long as there are forces that put in motion, a chain of events that lead to self-development, outcomes, and corresponding actions will occur. The experienced outcome is the same.

Ideas are critical to set off such a change of events. Given exposure to a specific idea facilitated by a particular environment, a person will evolve in a certain way. Should the brain process a different idea, another course of action will occur. Freedom is irrelevant. What is relevant is the catalysts to start the chain and the contributing ideas that will act to keep a self on the path toward a goal. The psychology of self-development is about facilitating the right ideas and understanding the role of the environment in reinforcing those ideas to create a sense of agency that leads to a meaningful and psychologically fulfilling existence.

In the absence of free will, ideas take on heightened importance. The self will naturally develop by being exposed to the right ideas within the right

⁹ Kaufman, S. B. (Host). (2021, March 4). Free Will with Sam Harris (Part 2) [Audio podcast]. In *The Psychology Podcast*. Scott Barry Kaufman.
<https://scottbarrykaufman.com/podcast/sam-harris-free-will-part-2/>

environment and by being exposed to the principles that help those ideas drive behaviour. How this occurs is somewhat of a mystery; I'm not entirely sure why specific ideas resonate with some people and not others. However, through the presentation of ideas in a coherent, emotionally engaging, and logically consistent way that can be actioned by an individual, ideas then become the catalyst of change in self-development. The change that occurs will still benefit the person's experienced life, despite the process of change remaining a mystery and independent of whether the person is active or passive in the process.

With no definitive knowledge about existence, the self still relies on ideas and the transmission of ideas both between people and across time to assess how best to progress through life. The theory of memes encapsulates the notion that ideas are responsible for transmitting behaviour between people, and therefore implicitly causing behaviour change within ourselves. Richard Dawkins coined the term *meme*¹⁰ in his seminal work *The Selfish Gene* and explored the notion that ideas (or memes) may operate in the same way as genes. The fundamental purpose of memes is to reproduce, much like a gene, across a population. The longer a meme remains in a host (i.e., a human), the more chance it will have to propagate. By using and reusing memes, the memes spread and are retained by the organism, increasing the likelihood of future spreading.

Various factors will contribute to a meme spreading. For example, memes that encourage longevity in their host are also likely to be spread just because they are around long enough to be shared. However, for a meme to survive, the meme must resonate with the population, making sense and interlinking with other commonly held beliefs. The meme must also be motivational. People will only adopt ideas that they believe have merit and align with their self-interest.

The idea of memes does have its critics. In some ways, memes are a more theoretical than empirical concept because memes are hard to define and measure, and therefore, hard to disprove. But the idea that people's lives can change by mere exposure to an idea is a concept with merit.

¹⁰ Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford University Press.

The potential of ideas to positively impact individuals and society is why I recognise the value of writing a book on Futureselves. By reading the book, the hope is that the ideas will resonate with your brain so you will be able to live the type of life you wish for and will pass the ideas to others. I may not be freely writing this book, but this doesn't detract from the enjoyable experience of writing. You may not be freely reading this book, but the ideas in this book have the potential to interact in your brain to create behaviours you may find helpful and rewarding. The conscious experience you will have by acting, based on being exposed to the ideas in the book, is the same whether or not you are free. What matters is the sense of agency that comes from having future states that you believe you are actively pursuing.

Consciousness and the experience of choice

The feeling of self as a subject with free will may be an illusion giving a person a sense of control, but personal change still occurs and the mere experience of the sense of choice matters. **What counts for self-development is not whether free will exists but that we are conscious.** A movie is no less enjoyable despite it not being real. We suspend the concept of reality, and watching (or making) the film is an experiential pleasure. This same metaphor applies equally to one's life.

The existence or non-existence of free will is not of paramount importance to the psychology of self-development. **The question for the science of self-development is how to maximise the experience of living.** Self-awareness does not mean free will is necessary. You may not be free, but you are conscious of your existence. The feeling of free will may be a distortion, nothing more than an illusion, but it is your illusion experienced through your consciousness, and it is an illusion for which you have a unique perspective.

Consciousness and being aware of one's self is not synonymous with the idea of free will or being able to operate freely. Even if people have no (or only a limited version) of free will, they still experience their consciousness. That experience will, in turn, result in the feeling of them shaping their lives. More importantly, humans naturally embrace a feeling of developing

their existence. It is from this feeling of agency that we derive meaning, which contributes to wellbeing. What matters is the sense of agency, not whether the agency exists. The corollary is that the psychology of self-development needs to focus on increasing the feeling of agency. Psychological health comes from an increased sense of agency, regardless of whether that feeling corresponds to reality.

Reconciling the true self and the experienced self

An argument favouring the benefit of promoting the existence of free will is that it brings about real patterns¹¹ in life outcomes, such as the right decisions leading to financial rewards that improve one's life. There does appear to be causal efficacy to describing free will as real and not illusionary. However, the problem with denial of the free will illusion, through the idea of actual patterns, is that the argument gives rise to inaccurate assumptions about the self. These ideas then confound other ideas that are real, such as consciousness and being aware of one's self, with the concept of free will or being able to operate freely. Once these ideas become inseparable, a more in-depth explanation of the reality of the self and its impact on self-development becomes secondary. In doing so, we may miss the opportunity to make substantive change in people's experienced life, as the focus is on enhancing free will rather than the real causes of a given outcome, which is anything but free will.

Despite the prevalence of the active self in psychological writing, fundamental science and philosophy challenge the argument of a freewheeling self. Like scientists, many philosophers agree that the concept of free will is inconsistent with the laws of physics, resulting in inherent breaks in logic when thinking about the concept of the self. Therefore, the question becomes if, as I maintain, free will is unlikely to exist, and if our behaviour is determined, how do I reconcile this with the way humans appear to function in the world, i.e., with the appearance of being free?

Philosophers discuss a third way of conceptualising the issue, which they term *compatibilism*. Compatibilists believe that free will and determinism

¹¹ Dennett, D. C. (1991). Real patterns. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 88(1), 27-51.

are not mutually exclusive but that freedom can exist in situations even though laws of nature define our behaviour. Compatibilism implies a person can make choices, or at least a person has the appearance of choice. Compatibilists argue that the appearance of choice is perhaps the best way of understanding the human condition. Compatibilists agree that forces determine us and are outside of our control. However, Compatibilists argue these forces are *non-deterministic in practice* until after the fact as we don't know the outcome of these forces before the result occurring.

You are not alone if you are confused by compatibilism as a reconciliation to the argument between free will and determinism. Some philosophers describe compatibilism as *soft-determinism* to capture the idea that a person can fight their intention to act or change course but are not in control of the 'will' in the first instance. Others see compatibilism as a sleight of hand to get around the problem of humans being just as determined (lacking in free will) as any other entity in the universe.

One way to reconcile the underlying idea proposed by compatibilists with the notion of free will within a psychological context is to differentiate between voluntary and involuntary behaviour. Both compatibilists and determinists would seemingly agree that involuntary behaviour is not evidence of free will. Voluntary behaviour, or behaviour with intent, is potentially closer to what compatibilists are focused on when referencing free will, and voluntary, intentional action is of equal interest to the argument presented in this book.

While ideas are not evidence of free will, ideas are part of the causal chain that links stimulus to behaviour. While I would argue that one's actions are not free, voluntary, intentional behaviour is explanatory. I begin to understand other people that I happen to be dealing with through their intentional behaviour. Therefore, the behaviour should not be dismissed or ignored as merely the result of chance. A person who kills another person by slipping on a banana peel while carrying a sharp object is very different from a person who, with intent, stabs a person until they die.

To understand oneself and understand others, we need to understand intent and voluntary behaviour, which is a manifestation of a feeling of agency. As a psychologist, I aim to help make that behaviour as functional

as possible in the pursuit of Futureselves. Intentional behaviour is essential to understand what may help or hinder a person from becoming the person they wish to be, but the intent is not synonymous with being free. Intentional behaviour helps me understand the nature of the self. My focus is not the philosophy and science of the self but the application of the self to human development. I, therefore, need to base my work on a coherent idea of the self that is relevant to the concept of self-development. **For those interested in self-development, the focus is not the true self but how to discuss the experienced self.**

The importance of free will in psychology

The purpose of discussing free will is to begin to highlight the critical reflection required to understand the nature of the self. My discussion of free will does not aim to provide a comprehensive review of research and theory on the self. Instead, the focus is to understand the critical aspect of what it means to be a *self* to develop an approach to self-development that has a high likelihood of impacting people's lives in a positive way. Understanding the absence of free will is central to the psychoeducation at the foundation of the importance of Futureselves.

The *self* referred to in my work, and the *self* as I know it, is a self that experiences the illusion of agency. The self can feel the illusion of initiating thoughts about the past and the future, and these thoughts have a real-world impact on the life we experience. By reimagining the past, we can lessen the traumatic effect of past events, change how the event is stored, and modify its causal link to future behaviour¹². The basis of Futureselves is the positive impact that the self will experience by taking a proactive approach to imaging their future.

The science and practice of self-development should accept and embrace the deterministic nature of the universe. It should incorporate tenets of

¹² Matthijssen, S. J., van Beerschoten, L. M., de Jongh, A., Klugkist, I. G., & van den Hout, M. A. (2018). Effects of "Visual Schema Displacement Therapy" (VSDT), an abbreviated EMDR protocol and a control condition on emotionality and vividness of aversive memories: Two critical analogue studies. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 63, 48-56.

determinism into psychological approaches while acknowledging the illusion of agency, as it is this illusion that gives one's life meaning. Getting that balance right is at the heart of a scientifically sound and psychological beneficial approach to applied psychology, be it for self-help or assisted psychotherapy.

Freedom is not a central concept to what it means to have a self, and the idea of free will may have limited importance when discussing self-development. Even with little or no free will, you can live a meaningful and happy life, a life that leads to greater psychological wellness than an alternative existence. What is critical is that you have the feeling, real or otherwise, of creating your life. Free will is one of the many illusions that human beings maintain. Freedom may not matter, but what does matter is the way that a person lives their unique life. Freedom is not what defines self-development. Existing in a way that is meaningful for an individual is the goal of self-development, with self-development being part of a rich and rewarding life.

Section 2: The Science of Self Awareness

Everything you know is a modification of that which is knowing.

– Sam Harris

Summary

One way of connecting the various debates about the self into a coherent causal system is to build a model of the self-development process from the ground up. Any theory of the self must be multi-disciplinary, be consistent with the fundamental sciences of physics, chemistry, and biology, and reference appropriate mathematical principles relevant to human behaviour. In essence, theorists and practitioners must ground the self in the world of matter and how this ultimately gives rise to the experience of being human.

In the absence of free will, the way the self receives, processes, and ultimately acts on information will be a defining feature of the self-development process. Thus, I want to clarify the link between sensation and perception and how it relates to attention (a key to how the self receives information) and self-awareness (the feeling of processing information). The clarity of this link will provide a scientific foundation for how the brain encodes data prior to driving behaviour. I also want to discuss how this link ultimately gives rise to a specific approach to self-development, tied to increasing a sense of agency, meaning, and psychological wellbeing.

The foundation of a scientifically sound approach to self-development is dependent on understanding how the self receives and processes information. Therefore, the starting point for understanding self-development I have chosen is the process of attention, as attention is the precursor of self-awareness. The link between attention and self-awareness is, in part, moderated by mental models that the brain uses to both negotiate the world and aid efficient information processing. Explaining these processes requires reference to the fundamental sciences noted, as well as identifying the mathematical laws that appear to drive human behaviour.