

Have It Your Way

‘Free Will,’ by Sam Harris

By DANIEL MENAKER
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FREE WILL By Sam Harris

For centuries, the question of free will — of whether human beings make choices that are not, or not entirely, determined by purely physical processes and causes — nested securely in the aeries of philosophy and religion. Ordinary people didn't worry about its having any practical significance for them. Although the issue of individual responsibility has animated novels, poetry, drama and parables, most modern people have gone about their lives believing that their minds were the agents of their decisions.

But the last half-century has seen this ancient subject pulled down from its academic perch and into courtrooms, laboratories, real-world questions about moral responsibility, and even popular culture. (It forms the plot of such contemporary movies as “Minority Report” and “The Adjustment Bureau.”)

Over the last few decades, procedures for measuring, imaging and analyzing mental processes have grown in number and subtlety. During this same period, books for the general reader about the brain and its functions, consciousness and will, thought and reasoning have proliferated. We have Daniel Dennett, Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins, Cordelia Fine, Oliver Sacks, Michael Gazzaniga, Daniel Kahneman and scores of others explaining, and extrapolating from, new findings in neuroscience and almost always addressing the matter of free will. (Daniel Wegner's “Illusion of Conscious Will,” published by the MIT Press in 2002, is a central full-length scientific text about this subject.)

Sam Harris, a Stanford graduate with a Ph.D. in neuroscience from U.C.L.A. and author of “The End of Faith,” a best-selling, Hitchensesque critique of religion, has now, in book form and fully armored, joined the free-will jousts with a kind of tractatus — a pamphlet-like work, “Free Will.” Parts of this book recycle some of Harris's earlier writing on the subject (as should have been acknowledged in the book's front matter and will be in future editions). But the work consists mainly of original text and distills Harris's position on the crucial issue of human agency.

His absolutist position, I should add, because, as he puts it near the beginning of the book: “Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making. Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no conscious control.” We assume that we

could have made other choices in the past, Harris continues, and we also assume that we consciously originate “our thoughts and actions in the present. . . . Both of these assumptions are false.”

Harris prosecutes his orderly case by explaining what he sees as the illogic of our belief in free will, and the recent findings that have undermined that belief. Probably the most influential among these discoveries were the results of the famous EEG experiments conducted by the physiologist Benjamin Libet and others in the early 1980s. They showed that the brain makes decisions before consciousness becomes aware of them. As Harris puts it, “activity in the brain’s motor cortex can be detected some 300 milliseconds” — almost enough time for LeBron James to get off a shot ahead of the buzzer — “before a person feels that he has decided to move.” As Harris’s text and impressive citations substantiate, these experiments and others like them have chiseled away much of the rock of free will upon which religion, jurisprudence and moral judgments have traditionally rested. (One could argue that Judaism and Christianity originated with Adam and Eve’s decision to disobey God’s order.)

For quite a while now, philosophers and public intellectuals, including Harris’s friend Dennett, have tried to rescue something like the common notion of free will from the jaws of science and logic by embracing a position called compatibilism. Compatibilists believe that “a person is free as long as he is free from any outer or inner compulsions,” Harris writes, and they “have produced a vast literature in an effort” to salvage free will. “More than in any other area of academic philosophy, the result resembles theology,” he continues, consigning it to what one assumes is, for him, the intellectual subbasement.

Like almost all other thinkers who have publicly rejected the traditional model of conscious will, Harris claims that doing so does not entail the end of morality, the idea of criminality and codes of ethical behavior. “Many people worry that free will is a necessary illusion,” he says. “It is surely conceivable that knowing (or emphasizing) certain truths about the human mind could have unfortunate psychological and/or cultural consequences.” But it need not. We can still condemn “the conscious intention to do harm,” he says, and he goes on to sketch a system of social and judicial evaluations that can lead to making valid moral judgments about people without invoking their wills. He even allows for the possible usefulness of public moral condemnation: “It may be that a sham form of retribution would still be moral — even necessary — if it led people to behave better than they otherwise would.” But he does acknowledge that “certain moral intuitions begin to relax” with the abandonment of belief in free will. “Once we recognize that even the most terrifying predators are, in a very real sense, unlucky to be who they are, the logic of hating (as opposed to fearing) them begins to unravel.”

Even though Harris assures us that civilized society can survive and might even improve with the abandonment of the concept of conscious agency, it would

ultimately affect everything — all of our doings and sayings and thoughts, especially in ordinary sociomoral circumstances. This slender volume is perhaps less important in itself than in its representation of the arguments for accepting that we are not “the authors of our actions.”

As literature, “Free Will” has some mild humor — “If I want to put a rabbit in this sentence, I am free to do so” — and some ringing pronouncements: “We are working directly with the forces of nature, for there is nothing but nature itself to work with.” But it is also generally prosaic, as most such intellectual treatises perforce tend to be. Harris often resorts to the thought-experimenters’ clichés of inventing examples that involve violence (shooting the president) or the quotidian (“I just drank a glass of water and feel absolutely at peace with the decision to do so”). But if you want to acquaint yourself with the chapbook basics of this essential argument, “Free Will” is a good, cogent and readable . . . um, choice.

Of course, questions persist. What, after the dismantling of free will, is consciousness? Just some kind of afflatus given off by three pounds of wetware? If so — if our conscious lives are nothing but the meniscus covering what our brains and bodies are up to, well then, isn’t that some glorious meniscus? It may not tell us what to do, but it does tell us what what we do means — oh, and what beauty is.

Couldn’t it be that we need the experience of what Wegner and others call “perceived control,” at least as a model of voluntary behavior, to get on with our lives and to have our achievements recognized and to be instructed by our failures? (Doesn’t Harris enjoy his success? I bet he does.) Finally, what happens to traditional qualities of character like courage, villainy, leadership? Poof! However correct Harris’s position may be — and I believe that his basic thesis must indeed be correct — it seems to me a sadder truth than he wants to realize.

Daniel Menaker is the author, most recently, of “A Good Talk.”

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Mind and Matter

How Children Develop the Idea of Free Will

By Alison Gopnik April 1, 2015 NY Times website

Young children develop the concept of free will in the short period between ages 4 and 6. Where does the notion of free will come from? For example, as a pure act of will, one could simply choose not to eat a cookie. A study looks at when and how our ideas about freedom develop. ENLARGE

Where does the notion of free will come from? For example, as a pure act of will, one could simply choose not to eat a cookie. A study looks at when and how our ideas about freedom develop.

We believe deeply in our own free will. I decide to walk through the doorway and I do, as simple as that. But from a scientific point of view, free will is extremely puzzling. For science, what we do results from the causal chain of events in our brains and minds. Where does free will fit in?

But if free will doesn't exist, why do we believe so strongly that it does? Where does that belief come from? In a new study in the journal *Cognition*, my colleagues and I tried to find out by looking at what children think about free will. When and how do our ideas about freedom develop?

Philosophers point out that there are different versions of free will. A simple version holds that we exercise our free will when we aren't constrained by outside forces. If the door were locked, I couldn't walk through it, no matter how determined I was. But since it's open, I can choose to go through or not. Saying that we act freely is just saying that we can do what we want when we aren't controlled by outside forces. This poses no problem for science. This version simply says that my actions usually stem from events in my brain—not from the world outside it.

But we also think that we have free will in a stronger sense. We aren't just free from outside constraints; we can even act against our own desires. I might want the cookie, believe that the cookie is delicious, think that the cookie is healthy. But at the last moment, as a pure act of will, I could simply choose not to eat the cookie.

In fact, I can even freely choose to act perversely. In Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment," Raskolnikov murders an old woman—a stupid, brutal, unnecessary crime—just to show that he truly has free will. This idea of pure autonomy is

more difficult to reconcile with the scientific view that our actions are always caused by the events in our minds and brains.

Where does this Raskolnikovian idea of free will come from? Does it point to a mysterious phenomenon that defies science? Or do we construct the idea to explain other aspects of our experience?

Along with Tamar Kushnir and Nadia Chernyak at Cornell University and Henry Wellman at the University of Michigan, my lab at the University of California, Berkeley, set out to see what children age 4 and 6 think about free will. The children had no difficulty understanding the first sense of free will: They said that Johnny could walk through the doorway, or not, if the door was open, but he couldn't go through a closed door.

But the 4-year-olds didn't understand the second sense of free will. They said that you couldn't simply decide to override your desires. If you wanted the cookie (and Mom said it was OK), you would have to eat it. The 6-year-olds, in contrast, like adults, said that you could simply decide whether to eat the cookie or not, no matter what. When we asked the 6-year-olds why people could act against their desires, many of them talked about a kind of absolute autonomy: "It's her brain, and she can do what she wants" or "Nobody can boss her around."

In other studies, in the journal *Cognitive Science*, Drs. Kushnir and Chernyak found that 4-year-olds also think that people couldn't choose to act immorally. Philosophers and theologians, and most adults, think that to be truly moral, we have to exercise our free will. We could do the wrong thing, but we choose to do the right one. But the 4-year-olds thought that you literally couldn't act in a way that would harm another child. They didn't develop the adult concept until even later, around 8.

We don't simply look into our minds and detect a mysterious free will. This research suggests, instead, that children develop the idea of free will to explain the complex, unpredictable interactions among all our conflicting desires, goals and moral obligations.

Richard Homa

I happened to read the article on the Cappella Nuova frescoes before this one, so I had a recent memory of 'Sigmund Freud' in my mind, and it surfaced when I read the words "and Mom said it was OK". I realize that Freud is, to put it mildly, out of fashion these days, but it seems to me that the change in perspective between the 4- and 6-year-olds can be seen in terms of the development of the superego. At 4, the real, 'out there' Mom has to give permission; at 6, we ask for and receive permission from the mental simulacrum of 'Mom' that we have built in our heads. Otherwise, nothing really has changed.

As for the formulation "We could do the wrong thing, but we choose to do the right one" being the position of "philosophers and theologians", as I understand it Socrates would have put it a bit differently: We would do the right thing if we understood the complete context and implications of our action, but we do not choose to understand...or perhaps choose not to understand.

TOM NEVEN

Without free will, how can we condemn a Stalin or praise a Martin Luther King? Each did what he was compelled to do by his genes, circumstances, or whatever. Without free will, there is no morality.

David Bakker

Utilitarianism seems to provide a solid, albeit controversial view of morality that fits the determinist perspective.

TOM NEVEN

@David Bakker Not really, since it cannot answer the question why be good in the first place, why seek the greatest good for the greatest number? In fact, in Utilitarianism there is no concept of rights, which Jeremy Bentham called "nonsense on stilts."

Anthony Cusano

I find it fascinating that determinists who say we have no free will, like Jerry Coyne, also say that once we admit that fact, we can reform the justice system to be more in harmony with the reality of nature. Yet the very act of letting go of one paradigm in order to bring our social system into harmony with nature seems to require some sort of willful act. Or else why would they spend so much energy trying to convince people to do it? They can point to nonlinear dynamics all they want, there is no way for them to prove that the outcome is pre-determined.

David Bakker

Not having free will, does not mean we do not have a will. The outcome is predetermined, as is their will to change people's' minds. Our experiences and our actions are our own. We have choices, but we will always make the same decision. Suppose supporting determinism is determined, and not supporting determinism is equally determined. That does not mean the debate is not worth having, but that whoever wins the debate was always going to win.

Anthony Cusano

It seems to me that if we can't determine the "winner" ahead of time, then determinism is not a complete description of the reality. It also seems to me that if the game is truly predetermined and pre-ordained, some will find it not truly worth playing. That gets perilously close to nihilism.

David Bakker

I may not be able to predict the outcome of a Rube Goldberg machine, does that mean it won't end in a determined fashion? Perhaps it does come dangerously close to nihilism, but does not lead directly to that conclusion

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Martin Kurlich

Alison,

Since you believe everything evolved, including our brains, consciousness and free will, do you think one day free will could evolve away?

Theodore Wight

The push pull of science is discovering down to the genetic level and the apparently opposing imaging of the brain. Don't forget that there is no definition of "moral" or "morality" as the Liberal Progressive Democrats are proving, nor more recently of free will. Homosexuality, once, illegal by law, is now powering states' legislation, and is quite popular. Is it an act of free will or coercion by genetics? Free will, is more and more being eliminated by Left-wing propaganda of what we have to think and how we MUST act. The broadening of "hate" crimes is just beginning. Did the German people have free will in the mass killings of up to millions of members of one specific "race?" These are questions unanswerable by "science." We as a nation borne under the Rule of Law, Christian mores, and free will and free enterprise will prove whether a nation can prosper as the United States clearly (to rational human beings, not LPDs) has to date, with arbitrary rules of the president who represents only half or so of the population. I say, "no!" We are committing or accepting slow suicide. The other half to LPDs, the Republican Party, is bumbling, clueless and leaderless.

[Http://www.periodictablet.com](http://www.periodictablet.com)

WILLIAM SCURRAH

Ten paragraphs, and only one mentions morality, yet that is where the issue of free will really exists. If I approach a closed door and decide not to open it and walk through, I have not made a moral decision. If I buy a cup of coffee rather than a cup of tea, I have made a consumer choice, not a moral choice. To reduce the concept of free will to trivial choices of that kind totally misses the point.

<https://ugotitwrong.wordpress.com/2011/05/01/sam-harriss-moral-swampland>

Mela Cummins

I can't help but think of the famous Stanford "Marshmallow Experiment," where 4-6 year olds were given a choice: eat the marshmallow now or wait until the teacher returned (about 15 minutes later) and get another marshmallow, too. To me, it's an interesting experiment on many levels, but clearly shows that from an early age we all have free will, it is just a matter of degree due to maturity and

cognitive development. Personally, I love free will and I hate free will. I've made many mistakes in my life!

lee beville

Free will? Does god have free will? If he knows the future with infallible certainty, he is powerless to change it. If he doesn't know the future with infallible certainty does he know what he will do before he does it? Our society is based on conditioning that does not allow conscious exercise of free will under most circumstances. Fat people are a good example.

Theodore Wight

How about homosexuals? A politically dangerous subject. But free will?

lee beville

@Theodore Wight not a free will issue in my mind

Adam Chernichaw

If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice. - Rush, "Freewill"

Patrick Meegan

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that earlier, but I love the Rush song.

Patrick Meegan

This article provided me my first look at the word "Raskolnikov's."

For that alone I am grateful. As to free will, I contend that it is developed over time, but that it is a gift from God. Covey's first Habit is to Be Proactive. This recognizes and requires free will.

Koti Ravi Kiran Chalasani

I subscribe to sunyata (non substantive nature of creation), a Mahayana Buddhist concept. As such free will is one of the mind imaginations and I always believed it exists with beginning of life. Evidenced, by control of suckling etc. May be I am missing something, but the article doesn't seem to be rigorous to me.

Daniel Dunne

Scientific proof of the centuries-old Roman Catholic belief, enshrined in Catholic theology, that 7 is the age of reason.

JOSEPH MICHAEL

old argument against free will ultimately was founded on deterministic, Newtonian physics: once you set the initial conditions for a system, it inevitably and inexorably followed only one future path.

Quantum mechanics replaced that physical determinism on a fundamental level: once you set the initial conditions for a system, it devolves into a superposition of probability waves, and you get a set of likelihoods, but not a single certainty, of future paths.

Philosophy apparently still hasn't quite caught up to this development, 70 years later. Even "determinism" based on physical laws allows room for "free will" to exist to some extent.

Justin Murray

"Even "determinism" based on physical laws allows room for "free will" to exist to some extent."

That would depend on whether or not we can actively interfere with that probability or if our actions are just one of those probabilities actually playing out. Quantum mechanics doesn't fully overrule the deterministic element of Newtonian physics, it just places determinism into a state of question. Determinism can still exist, just with a different probability force determining the result.

All we can say at this point is determinism isn't absolutely true, not that it is absolutely false.

Matt Boettner

@Justin Murray @JOSEPH MICHAEL A good "lay persons" explanation of quantum wave functions and probability can be found here:
<http://physics.stackexchange.com/a/44027>

Bridget Moorman

@Matt Boettner @Justin Murray @JOSEPH MICHAEL Excellent link - read many of the answers - all the different perspectives were interesting. Thank you.

Tomas Pajaros

"It's her brain, and she can do what she wants" or "Nobody can boss her around."

sorry, but Hillary Clinton erasing her documents rather than comply with subpoena somehow came to mind immediately.

I guess that explains the complex, unpredictable interactions among her conflicting desires, goals and moral obligations

Did Your Brain Make You Do It?

By JOHN MONTEROSSO and BARRY SCHWARTZ

Published: July 27, 2012 NY Times website

ARE you responsible for your behavior if your brain “made you do it”? Often we think not. For example, research now suggests that the brain’s frontal lobes, which are crucial for self-control, are not yet mature in adolescents. This finding has helped shape attitudes about whether young people are fully responsible for their actions. In 2005, when the Supreme Court ruled that the death penalty for juveniles was unconstitutional, its decision explicitly took into consideration that “parts of the brain involved in behavior control continue to mature through late adolescence.”

Similar reasoning is often applied to behavior arising from chemical imbalances in the brain. It is possible, when the facts emerge, that the case of James E. Holmes, the suspect in the Colorado shootings, will spark debate about neurotransmitters and culpability.

Whatever the merit of such cases, it’s worth stressing an important point: as a general matter, it is always true that our brains “made us do it.” Each of our behaviors is always associated with a brain state. If we view every new scientific finding about brain involvement in human behavior as a sign that the behavior was not under the individual’s control, the very notion of responsibility will be threatened. So it is imperative that we think clearly about when brain science frees someone from blame — and when it doesn’t.

Unfortunately, our research shows that clear thinking on this issue doesn’t come naturally to people. Several years ago, with the psychologist Edward B. Royzman, we published a study in the journal *Ethics & Behavior* that demonstrated the power of neuroscientific explanations to free people from blame.

In our experiment, we asked participants to consider various situations involving an individual who behaved in ways that caused harm, including committing acts of violence. We included information about the protagonist that might help make sense of the action in question: in some cases, that information was about a history of psychologically horrific events that the individual had experienced (e.g., suffering abuse as a child), and in some cases it was about biological

characteristics or anomalies in the individual's brain (e.g., an imbalance in neurotransmitters). In the different situations, we also varied how strong the connection was between those factors and the behavior (e.g., whether most people who are abused as a child act violently, or only a few).

The pattern of results was striking. A brain characteristic that was even weakly associated with violence led people to exonerate the protagonist more than a psychological factor that was strongly associated with violent acts. Moreover, the participants in our study were much more likely, given a protagonist with a brain characteristic, to view the behavior as "automatic" rather than "motivated," and to view the behavior as unrelated to the protagonist's character. The participants described the protagonists with brain characteristics in ways that suggested that the "true" person was not at the helm of himself. The behavior was caused, not intended.

In contrast, while psychologically damaging experiences like childhood abuse often elicited sympathy for the protagonist and sometimes even prompted considerable mitigation of blame, the participants still saw the protagonist's behavior as intentional. The protagonist himself was twisted by his history of trauma; it wasn't just his brain. Most participants felt that in such cases, personal character remained relevant in determining how the protagonist went on to act.

We labeled this pattern of responses "naïve dualism." This is the belief that acts are brought about either by intentions or by the physical laws that govern our brains and that those two types of causes — psychological and biological — are categorically distinct. People are responsible for actions resulting from one but not the other. (In citing neuroscience, the Supreme Court may have been guilty of naïve dualism: did it really need brain evidence to conclude that adolescents are immature?)

Naïve dualism is misguided. "Was the cause psychological or biological?" is the wrong question when assigning responsibility for an action. All psychological states are also biological ones.

A better question is "how strong was the relation between the cause (whatever it happened to be) and the effect?" If, hypothetically, only 1 percent of people with a brain malfunction (or a history of being abused) commit violence, ordinary considerations about blame would still seem relevant. But if 99 percent of them do, you might start to wonder how responsible they really are.

It is crucial that as a society, we learn how to think more clearly about causes and personal responsibility — not only for extraordinary actions like crime but also for ordinary ones, like maintaining exercise regimens, eating sensibly and saving for retirement. As science advances, there will be more and more “causal” alternatives to intentional explanations, and we will be faced with more decisions about when to hold people responsible for their behavior. It’s important that we don’t succumb to the allure of neuroscientific explanations and let everyone off the hook.

John Monterosso is an associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Southern California. Barry Schwartz, a co-author of “Practical Wisdom,” is a professor of psychology at Swarthmore College.