

Free Will

"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 not aware, and over which we exert no conscious control. We do not have the freedom we think we have."

"What I will do next and why remains at bottom a mystery, one that is fully determined by the laws of nature and the prior state of the universe."

In a nutshell

Our actions are the result of our brain states at any moment, which are in turn subject to prior causes. It is useless to blame people for what they are.

In a similar vein

Julian Baggini *The Ego Trick* (p 32)
Ralph Waldo Emerson *Fate* (p 92)

David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (p 136)
Friedrich Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* (p 220)
Baruch Spinoza *Ethics* (p 286)

Sam Harris

Sam Harris begins this short (100-page) book with an account of a horrific crime. In 2007, in a quiet American town, two men entered a house before dawn and, finding an adult male asleep, bludgeoned him with a baseball bat. They went upstairs to his wife and daughters, who were still sleeping. After the daughters were bound to the beds, one of the men drove the mother to the bank, where she withdrew \$15,000 and handed it over. Back at the house, the men divided up the money, and raped the older daughter. Hearing the father stir, they doused the house in gasoline and lit it. The father escaped alive, but the girls and her mother died of smoke inhalation. When the police later asked one of the men why he had not untied the others before starting the fire, he replied, "It didn't cross my mind."

Harris's point in telling the story? Our reaction of horror at what the men did is based on the assumption that they had a choice not to, but went ahead anyway. It is this callous intentionality that matters to us (we don't really care that one of the men was raped repeatedly as a child, or that the other recently attempted suicide from remorse). Though Harris finds their behavior sickening, he also admits that if he were forced to trade places with one of them, he would be that man: "There would be no part of me that could see the world differently." With the same genes, life history, brain, and even "soul," we would have done what that man did, in that moment.

Free will was always an important topic in philosophy, but it has become a hot one in recent times because of findings in neuroscience. Harris cites tests showing that the decision to do something (lift an arm, move a chair) is made in the brain some time before "we" consciously become aware of it. Therefore, our neurology is almost set up to make us believe the illusion that we are acting freely. In reality though, he argues, our actions and thoughts are the direct result of our neurological wiring and brain states.

If we are what we are, we cannot be otherwise

There are so many processes in our brain that we have no control over, any more than we control our heartbeat or our breathing. We don't "decide the next thought we think" – thinking just happens. Decisions don't arise from consciousness, they *appear* in consciousness.

of our physical and emotional heritage, how can we ever hold people truly responsible for their actions? Harris says that his thinking does not absolve people of crimes – you obviously have to treat a man who murders a child differently than one who kills one by accident in his car. Nevertheless, to say that a rapist or murderer could have behaved differently is also to say that they were free to resist their impulses, but given that their brain states are the subject of prior causes of which they were subjectively unaware, how could they have acted differently? And if this is so, how can we “blame” them?

Yet if we are indeed mere instruments of our biology, how can we have moral responsibility, and what does this do to our criminal justice system? Even if free will is illusory, it is still clear that our actions have beneficial or harmful effects. In terms of criminal justice, the emphasis therefore must shift from punishment to risk assessment. Some people do need to be locked up if they are a threat to others, Harris says, yet the traditional moral finger pointing associated with crime becomes no longer valid.

Where do our choices come from?

Harris argues that we do not determine our wants, they are “given by the cosmos” in ways that we cannot fathom. Perhaps you feel thirsty and you drink a glass of water, but not a glass of juice. Why not juice? It did not occur to you, any more than it occurred to the man to untie his victims from the bed before the fire started.

Harris is keen to point out that there is a difference between volitional and nonvolitional states of mind, which are governed by different systems of the brain. Therefore, consciousness is real enough. But the fact that we have a state of conscious deliberation does not mean that we are free willed, because “We do not know what we intend to do until the intention arises.”

The traditional libertarian view imagines that “human agency must magically rise above the plane of physical causation” and that our conscious intentions show that we have free will. True, says Harris, intentions do tell us a great deal about a person, but the origin of intentions is totally mysterious.

Harris’s controversial point is that our “attribution of agency” (the reason we give for having done something) is always in error. We make up reasons after the fact to give order to our minds, but the truth is that we do not know why we are how we are. “We do whatever it is we do, and it is meaningless to assert that we could have done otherwise.” Or, put a different way: “You can do what you decide to do, but you cannot decide what you will decide to do.”

The idea that free will is an illusion has had plenty of support in philosophy. Schopenhauer dismissed free will out of hand, and Plotinus said, centuries before, “All our ideas will be determined by a chain of previous causes.” In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote, “I shall never tire of emphasising a small, terse fact, namely, that a thought comes when ‘it’ wishes, and not when ‘I’ wish.” The idea of a self-willing ego is a myth, Nietzsche thought; it is more accurate to speak of things that “one” does, meaning a complex of sensation, emotion, and thinking.

Harris sees the idea of free will as the outgrowth of religion, its main purpose to provide psychological relief. But he does ask, late in the book: Won’t awareness of the illusion of free will diminish the quality of our lives? This is a subjective question and he can only speak from his own experience, saying that it has only increased his compassion for others, and lessened his sense of entitlement or pride, since his achievements cannot really be called “his,” but rather are the result of his lucky upbringing, genes, and the time and place in which he lives. Awareness of the illusion of free will has not made him more fatalistic but in fact has increased his sense of freedom, because his hopes, fears, and so on are not seen in such a personal, indelible way.

Harris spent years practicing Buddhist meditation, the very purpose of which is to lose this sense of an indelible, solid self, and the influence of this practice is clear in his work. The other essential feature of Buddhism, of course, is its emphasis on causality. Our lives are shaped by our actions in other lives, of which we will never be aware. Karma plays itself out whether we believe in free will or not.

Sam Harris

Born in 1967, Harris grew up in Los Angeles with a Jewish mother and a Quaker father. He did not have a religious upbringing, but religion as a subject had always interested him. He enrolled at Stanford University in English, but left during his sophomore year to travel to Asia, where he studied meditation with Hindu and Buddhist teachers. In 1997 he returned to Stanford University to complete a BA in philosophy. In 2009 he completed his PhD in neuroscience at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Harris’s bestsellers include The End of Faith (2004), Letter to a Christian Nation (2006), The Moral Landscape (2010), and Free Will (2012). He is also the cofounder and CEO of Project Reason, a nonprofit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society.