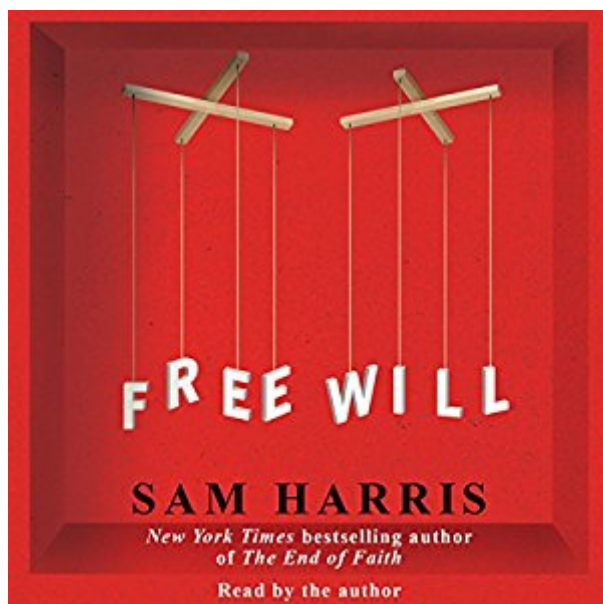


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# Free Will



## Synopsis

A belief in free will touches nearly everything that human beings value. It is difficult to think about law, politics, religion, public policy, intimate relationships, morality-as well as feelings of remorse or personal achievement-without first imagining that every person is the true source of his or her thoughts and actions. And yet the facts tell us that free will is an illusion. In this enlightening book, Sam Harris argues that this truth about the human mind does not undermine morality or diminish the importance of social and political freedom, but it can and should change the way we think about some of the most important questions in life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

It was a Reformed theologian who disabused me of the concept of free will several years ago, and I've found it a fascinating topic ever since. Sam Harris has produced a brief monograph on the issue that manages to distill the key issues without creating an impenetrable density for the reader to slog through. For those who think value is found in a dollars-to-words ratio, the thinness and focus of this volume might not seem like a bargain, but I loved having a book with something important to say that I actually READ. I'm not saying that all subject matter must be reduced to tweets, but I know that, for example, as fascinated as I am by the topic of moral improvement that Stephen Pinker covers in *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, I am never going to read more than 600 pages just on that subject. There are simply too many other things I also care about. So Harris has done people like me a real favor by thinking about free will and pulling together the

relevant evidence for his position, and expressing his ideas with his trademark wit and clarity in a work that can be digested in an hour or less. For those who read about free will in other books and publications, there's nothing very new here. In fact, given the choice between recommending this book and something else, depending on the person I was talking with, I might instead suggest Cris Evatt's *The Myth of Free Will, Revised & Expanded Edition*. Cris has no credentials and the book is a collection of essays and quotes from various sources rather than a single, cohesive argument, but it makes one of the strongest cumulative cases for determinism in a short work that I've seen. The one thing that did surprise me is the positive blurb on the book jacket from Owen Flanagan, whose *The Problem Of The Soul: Two Visions Of Mind And How To Reconcile Them* is a stunning case for compatibilism, whereas Harris writes, "Compatibilists have produced a vast literature in an effort to finesse [moral complications from determinism]. More than in any other area of academic philosophy, the result resembles theology. (I suspect this is not an accident. The effort has been primarily one of not allowing the laws of nature to strip us of a cherished illusion.)" And again: "Compatibilism amounts to nothing more than an assertion of the following creed: A puppet is free as long as he loves his strings." What Harris (convincingly, in my view) makes a case for is quite different from the case that Flanagan makes, so I think it is to Flanagan's credit that he nevertheless endorses Harris's work. Daniel Dennett comes in for some well-deserved (but well-modulated) criticism in "Free Will" for the sort of epistemological shell-game he employs in an effort to rescue some "elbow room" for a brand of free will. I noted earlier that it was the argument of a theologian friend that made me realize that free will is impossible, but that's not quite complete. It was that argument in addition to the utter failure of Dennett's *Freedom Evolves* to convince me that anything like a free will worth having could possibly exist that drained the last corpuscle of my delusion from my mind. There's nothing like a failed argument, by friend or foe, to make you consider the plausible correctness of the opposite position. The weaknesses I discerned in Dennett's case are precisely the ones Harris goes after, and in brief, intelligent prose dispatches them with an effectiveness and efficiency few authors could manage. Harris states that the existence of an immaterial soul does nothing to rescue the notion of libertarian free will. This is certainly correct, although I have heard the argument made many times as a trope that "free will is not possible if humans don't have a spirit or soul." Because the issue is causality in general and not merely physical causality, whether a cause is purely physical, like a cue ball hitting an eight ball (or an electron firing in a neuron), or can be thought of in immaterial terms, like an idea inspiring a poem, makes no difference. Everything, physical or otherwise, is either the result of prior conditions, or if not, is random. Souls change none of that. So theists who try to argue that without a god,

humans have no free will are wrong. That simply doesn't matter. And perhaps the most disturbing implication of some points in Harris's argument is that if a god did exist, in all likelihood it wouldn't have libertarian free will, either. If you struggled with some of the absurdities inherent in our existence before, a deep appreciation of our condition vis-a-vis determinism will push you so far down the rabbit hole you might just find yourself reading much longer, more profound, denser works in some effort to get your bearings. And in the end it is probable that the best you'll be able to muster is simple agreement with what Harris says in this slim volume.

Free Will by Sam Harris "Free Will" is the persuasive essay that makes the compelling case that free will is an illusion. Free will is intuitively understood but a difficult concept to master. Dr. Harris systematically, and with few precise words destroys the notion of the concept of free will. With a degree in philosophy and a doctorate degree in neuroscience and the innate ability to convey difficult concepts to the layperson, Dr. Harris is best suited to enlighten us on such a challenging topic. This 96-page book is composed of the following eight chapters: 1. The Unconscious Origins of the Will, 2. Changing the Subject, 3. Cause and Effect, 4. Choices, Efforts, Intentions, 5. Might the Truth Be Bad for Us?, 6. Moral Responsibility, 7. Politics, and 8. Conclusion. Positives: 1. Fascinating topic in the hands of a great thinker. 2. Profound without being unintelligible. Elegant and accessible prose. 3. Does a great job of dissecting free will. The author systematically breaks down the concept of free will by attacking it from various angles. 4. More so than his previous great essay "Lying" he makes more use of his scientific background. He relays studies that support his arguments. 5. The illusion of being in control is a concept that Dr. Harris masterfully destroys. 6. The author differentiates voluntary and involuntary actions. 7. Great quotes, "Our sense of free will results from a failure to understand this: We do not know what we intend to do until the intention itself arises". 8. A discussion on the three main philosophical approaches: determinism, libertarianism, and compatibilism. 9. Great examples that help the reader comprehend the challenging concept of free will. 10. Classic Harris eloquence, "How can we be 'free' as conscious agents if everything that we consciously intend is caused by events in our brains that we do not intend and of which we are entirely unaware? We can't". 11. Does quantum mechanics provide a foothold for free will? Find out. 12. Does the process of conscious deliberation provide a foundation for free will? Find out. 13. Do we really control our minds? Once again, the mastery of Dr. Harris continues. 14. The implications of not having a free will. Great points! 15. A fascinating discussion on the level of responsibility. 16. How does a retributive judicial system fit in all this? 17. Free will within a religious framework. 18. Free will and politics. 19. A final chapter that brings everything together. 20.

Links worked great on the Kindle.<sup>21</sup> Brief, powerful essay that can be read multiple times. Negatives: 1. My only discomfort with the essay is the casual use of the term soul. I understand that Dr. Harris does not accept the soul as an empirical concept and may have used the term as a metaphor (equating it to the brain in one instance) but I prefer leaving out all supernatural terms unless properly defined. 2. Some topics are introduced briefly and leave you wanting more, isn't that always the case with Dr. Harris? 3. Having to wait for Dr. Harris's next intellectual contribution. In summary, what makes this essay great is that the more you read the more you get out of it. It's a profound essay that is easy to follow but is hard to master. It is so rewarding to read interesting topics from great minds. This essay is the ultimate appetizer, delicious and with an everlasting aftertaste. Free will is not an easy concept to understand but a worthwhile pursuit to endeavor and Dr. Harris makes the journey a fulfilling one. I can't recommend this brief book enough, highly recommended. Further suggestions: "The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values" by the same author, "Who's in Charge?: Free Will and the Science of the Brain" by Michael S. Gazzaniga, "The Myth of Free Will, Revised & Expanded Edition" by Cris Evatt, "The Problem Of The Soul: Two Visions Of Mind And How To Reconcile Them" by Owen Flanagan, "Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality" by Patricia S. Churchland, "The Brain and the Meaning of Life" by Paul Thagard, "Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts" by Carol Tavris, "Hardwired Behavior: What Neuroscience Reveals about Morality" by Lawrence Tancredi, and the "The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature" by Steven Pinker.

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