*Freewill* by Sam Harris

In his short book, *Freewill*, Sam Harris mounts a concerted attack on the notion that we are free. He argues that our universe is predicated on some mix of determinism and randomness that doesn’t stop somewhere just outside our craniums, but rather penetrates all the way in to our thoughts and intentions carrying an inert “conscious witness” along for the ride.

Past Behaviour and Thoughts

He starts out by identifying two assumptions that will serve to define freewill: 1. We could have behaved differently than we did in the past and, 2. We are the conscious source of our thoughts and actions. He asserts that both of these are false.

The first assumption corresponds to what we saw Alfred Mele call *ambitious freewill* (see my previous article). Harris rejects this by adopting the materialist or naturalist stance that we live in a physical universe governed by physical laws, one of which is causality.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nothing in our physical universe happens without a prior physical cause and since we are a part of that universe, this must also apply to us.

He challenges the second assumption by first pointing to Benjamin Libet (which I have described here) and other recent similar experiments that appear to suggest we are not the conscious authors of our decisions. Rather the brain ‘decides’ what to do and our conscious minds simply follow along confabulating the experience of direct control. He also attacks the idea we are the conscious source of our thoughts in a more personal fashion by asking you to think about the thoughts you have. Do ‘you’ create them or do they just pop up? He holds that a close inspection will reveal that not only do you not place thoughts in your head, it would be impossible for you to do so because that would mean thinking your thoughts *before* you think them. Rather, what happens is that thoughts occur and then we recognise them via what he calls the “conscious witness”. This is a position known as epiphenomenalism.

Choice and Desire

Clearly we can, and frequently do, *choose* to do certain things. But Harris asks *why* you chose to do precisely those things instead of others? In a speech on his book, he asks the audience to think of a movie. After they do so, he asks them to reflect on what actually happened in their minds during this process. Here is his account. Movie names suddenly pop up in the mind. Then the list narrows down to maybe 3 or 4 as the rest are (somehow) rejected and you select one. But why did you select that one? You may be able to offer a reason (“because it was the last movie I saw” for example) but why didn’t you opt for your favourite movie instead? Ultimately, we can’t explain these types of questions because they take place without our conscious awareness, that is, without any free will.

The exact same thing can be said of our desires. *Why* do you desire whatever it is you desire? One of Harris’ examples is that of a Christian homosexual, who can’t simply choose to be attracted to members of the opposite sex even though he or she believes homosexuality to be a sin. This is a powerful example because even in the face of a strong motivation to change, the Christian is completely helpless, a slave to their biology.

Fatalism

“If everything is determined, why should I do anything? Why not just sit back and see what happens?” Harris thinks this is confused thinking. Determinism is not fatalism. The former says that causes produce effects and all causes are physical whereas the latter holds that certain effects will happen irrespective of the preceding causes. If you do, in fact, do nothing, on the determinist account you had no free choice in the matter. It does not follow that you were fated to do nothing irrespective of prior events.

Quantum Indeterminacy

Indeterminism, that is, true randomness (which physicists tell us holds sway at the quantum level), doesn’t give the proponent of freewill any purchase because the heart of freewill requires that we have the ability to control our future. Randomness is quite the opposite of this.

Compatibilism

Compatibilism is the philosophical attempt to reconcile freewill with determinism, insisting that the two concepts are in fact compatible. Harris’ arguments against compatibilism turn on the idea that compatibilists all take too many liberties with their definitions of freewill. Freewill is the idea that we are authoring our thoughts and actions in some way that is not purely determined by physical laws of nature. Compatibilists inevitably tweak this definition.

Harris points to Daniel Dennett who, as a compatibilist, claims that the “I” in the assertion “I am free” doesn’t mean “I, as conscious witness, independent of my brain, am free”. Rather, the self we reference when we say ‘I’ includes all of the events taking place in our brains, *even those happening without our conscious awareness*.

However, Harris counters, if this were true, it would then follow that we ought to think we are responsible for our heart beat and the production of red blood cells in the same way that we think we are morally responsible for our actions. Expanding our freewill in this way renders it meaningless.

Morality and Responsibility

So, without freewill, is no one really, truly responsible for their actions? How can we incarcerate or punish criminals if they were just unlucky to be born to the parents they were, in the country they were, with the genes they were, etc.?

Harris resolves this dilemma by saying that, “What we condemn most in another person is *the conscious intention to do harm*”, not the fact that ‘you’ are the sole, independent cause of the actions of a murderer, but that for whatever reason, you have the mind of a murderer. In the same way, we put down dangerous animals, not because we think they have freewill, but because they are dangerous and will harm innocent people if we do nothing. We would also lock up hurricanes and deadly viruses if we could for the same reason. The desire to lock murderers up makes sense *even* *without attributing freewill to them*.

There are also three positive consequences of determinism:

First, people are responsible for their actions without being metaphysically ‘guilty’.

Second, retribution and revenge, indeed hatred itself, all become groundless.

Third, realising that you are just lucky to have the influences you had (and nothing makes you who you are except those influences) encourages humility.

Conclusion

Harris lays out a very compelling case for determinism and competently dispenses with some of the challenges typically offered in favour of freewill. That inner, ‘felt’ sense that we have freewill and are truly independent agents is just an illusion but rather than this paralysing us into inaction and despondency, Harris maintains that seeing the illusion for what it is ironically ‘frees’ us to act with more compassion and understanding.

In my next article I will outline why I think Harris is completely wrong about this.

1. Harris does say that his argument is not contingent on materialism and it’s true that claiming you are a soul composed of “soul stuff” won’t circumvent Harris’ central claim that you, as the “conscious witness of your experiences”, are fundamentally not responsible for your thoughts. However, I am not making the claim that I am composed of “soul stuff” and from the language that Harris repeatedly and consistently uses throughout the book (“laws of nature”, “cause and effect”, “The brain is a physical system, entirely beholden to the laws of nature…”, etc.) it is abundantly clear that he is a materialist. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)