



Where there's a will...

Free Will • Sam Harris • The Free Press • 2012

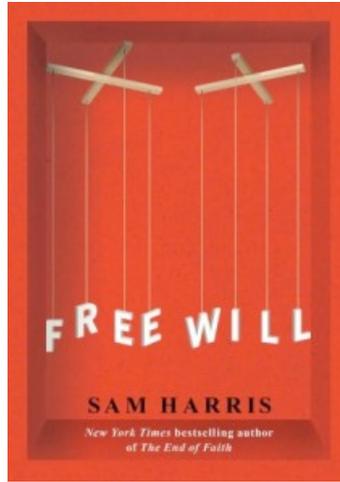
THE IDEA of Free Will has been affirmed and rejected in endless philosophical arguments and psychological and neurological research papers. Now Sam Harris, of *The End of Faith* fame, has opted to give us the final verdict. And I've chosen to review it here. Or rather, according to Harris, I didn't. It just happens because of external circumstances and internal neuronal events over which I have no control. That would be neat – for I wouldn't really be responsible for anything I'm saying here. But, of course, it's more complicated...

Harris quotes a brain experiment that seems to show that the motor cortex is active 300 milliseconds before a person feels they have decided to move. But how do we know the cortex wasn't just getting on stand-by because a command was imminent? And what about decisions arrived at by research, discussing options, testing models and then sleeping over it... Well, these he also dismisses as ultimately based on pre-coded preferences which we then rationalise.

Most of the things we do are of course unconscious; much of what drives us is conditioned – like fashion, religion and other addictions. Which doesn't prove we *never* have a choice. And no one can really prove we do, either. Debating it with people shows it to be a very emotive issue. For if we have no choice and no meaningful say (a condition I got to hate in the army...), what are we, what's the point? Have we responsibility? Has there ever been a situation where we could have chosen differently? No, says Harris. While it's hard to see ourselves as automata – plants growing towards the light, cockroaches crawling into a cranny, parents protecting their children, Humanists working for charity – it's all pre-programmed reactions. How could this free will illusion arise, then? How could it make evolutionary sense?

Harris quotes research showing that disbelief in free will increases cheating and aggression and reduces helpfulness. No surprise there. Harris himself feels he's become a better person, forgiving more easily because he understands the perpetrators can't help it. He discusses our justice system. If there's no guilt, how can we punish? He argues, sensibly, it's enough that prisons are a deterrent and potential places of reform and take anti-social people out of circulation.

While ridiculing 'Compatibilism' (where free will is compatible with determinism), he wants his cake and eat it: "*My choices matter – and there are paths to making wiser ones – but I can't choose what I choose*". (39) Or: "*Getting behind our conscious thoughts and feelings can allow us to steer a more intelligent course through our*



lives (while knowing, of course, that we are ultimately being steered)(47)". He's clearly not been conditioned to avoid blatant contradictions.

We get the key to Harris's psyche on p47: "*Becoming sensitive to the background causes of one's thoughts and feelings can – paradoxically – allow for greater creative control over one's own life*". Hello? No one who has done any therapy, counselling, or worked on their personality or psyche would find this 'insight' paradoxical or be surprised that one can achieve (more) control over one's life. But maybe that's where Sam and those shallow braniacs who praise him on the cover are at. Their big assumption: mind and brain are identical. That's

another huge debate – but Harris feels it's irrelevant because even if there was a 'soul'. "*Anyone born with the soul of a psychopath has been profoundly unlucky*". That is not how most would think of 'soul'. Don't know if I

have – or am - one – but I've had enough experiences to be pretty sure that, beyond the circuitry and chemistry in my skull, that there's something more evolved, let's call it mind, that is connected to my body and brain.

Harris's humans are static – even when working on themselves they're only following

unconscious orders. Maybe they are – but this could still result in a new quality. Like life arising from matter. Like consciousness arising from life. We are part of nature, molecules evolved into animals. Why stop there, though? Why couldn't higher faculties evolve? Why not work on our own evolution? And why shouldn't science eventually explain that? Right now it can just detect brain activity – but not if I'm contemplating gay marriage, my phone bill or Sam Harris. Humility would be more appropriate than his cocksure arrogance. And I suppose our ability to use our will freely is just marginally ahead of neuro-science's ability to explain it away. But where there's a will...

I guess what freaks out Harris and his ilk is that their mighty brains are not the last word of evolution, that their ultimate reason only gives us a partial picture – flat and black&white. He can't chose to transcend that – but perhaps it'll happen to him some day. On his cover the letters of free will are dangling from puppeteer strings. We're still exploring who or what is pulling those strings within and without us – and we will do so until we ourselves become the puppeteers.

This whole question finds us out of our depth and perplexed. So I'm not happy with this review. I can't *prove* there's more to it all, can't show you free will in action. Harris's scientific stance, however annoying, is cogent. And yet... □