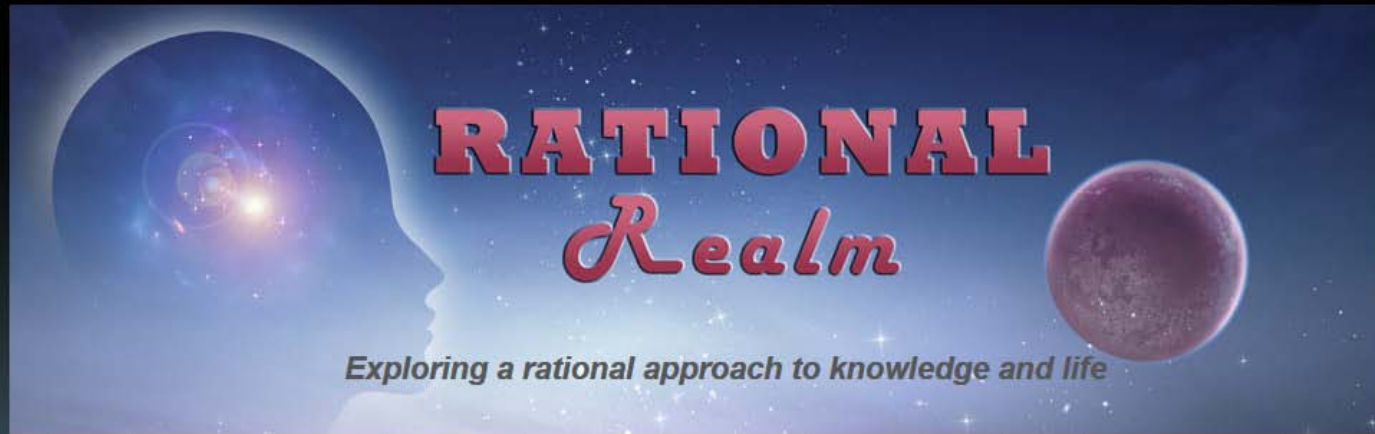


Sam Harris on Free Will

Leslie Allan

Philosophy Matters

Tuesday 27th August 2024



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What's New

Topics for This Session

- Who is Sam Harris?
- What is Harris' book about and what are its objectives?
- Review Harris' first argument against free will
 - Could we have behaved differently?
- Review Harris' second argument against free will
 - Are we the source of our thoughts?
- Harris' two conflicting theories of mind
- Harris' three 'paradoxes'
- Do Harris' two arguments against free will succeed?

About Sam Harris

- born in 1967 in California
- B.A. in philosophy (2000), Ph.D. in cognitive neuroscience (2009)
- vanguard of New Atheism's pushback against religion
- one of 'Four Horsemen' (with Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett)
- advocates for meditation and mindfulness
- pledges 10% of income to effective charities
- hosts *Waking Up* podcast
- author of *The End of Faith* (2004),
The Moral Landscape (2010)
- *Free Will* published in 2012 (75 pages)



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Book Contents

1. **The Unconscious Origins of the Will** —draws on own introspection and Libet experiments to show we are not conscious authors of our actions as our brains have already decided for us
2. **Changing the Subject** —defends his view against compatibilists who describe a kind of free will that is irrelevant to the way most people use the term
3. **Cause and Effect** —argues indeterminists relying on possible quantum indeterminacy make free will and responsibility for our actions unexplainable
4. **Choices, Efforts, Intentions** —makes radical U-turn by resurrecting common-sense notions that our choices matter and that we bear moral and legal responsibility for our actions
5. **Might the Truth Be Bad for Us?** —concedes accepting determinism leads to bad consequences for some, but has made him a better person with more control over his own life
6. **Moral Responsibility** —resurrects common-sense notions of right and wrong/moral responsibility by working through five cases of unintentional and intentional killing
7. **Politics** —shows even though notion of “self made” man is a fiction, we still need to hold people to account in spite of them neither choosing their genes nor their circumstances
8. **Conclusion** —using an experiment on himself, he reinforces how we are completely unaware of the cause of our ideas and thus the free will concept is nonsensical



Definitions

- ‘Determinism’** = view that all human actions, both involuntary and voluntary, have a complete cause in terms of physical states of the brain and its processes
- ‘Indeterminism’** = view that is the contrary of determinism, stating instead that at least some human behaviours are not fully caused by prior physical states
- ‘Libertarianism’** = view that both determinism is false *and* that human beings have the capacity for free will
- ‘Hard determinism’** = view that determinism is incompatible with a capacity for free will
- ‘Compatibilism’** = view that determinism is *not* incompatible with a capacity for free will
- ‘Free will’** = refers to genuine human agency and to the ability to have done otherwise under the same circumstances

Free Will — Determinism Matrix

		Free Will	
		No	Yes
Determinism	Yes	Hard Determinism	Soft Determinism (Compatibilism)
	No	Hard Incompatibilism	Libertarianism

Book Objectives

- Harris has two overall objectives for his book:
 1. demolish the notion that human beings have true agency—that they can exercise free will—based on:
 - Harris' own introspection of his mental states
 - the scientific truth that all human actions have a physical cause (a brain state)
 2. show how this seemingly alarming conclusion about human agency need not diminish our sense of moral responsibility (addressed in the second session in this series)

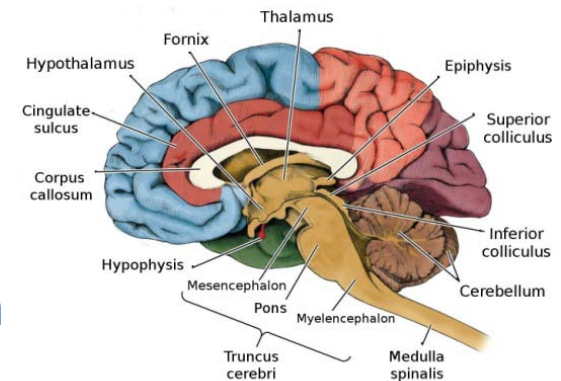


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Two Arguments Against Free Will

- In his untitled introduction, Harris [2012: 10] states two key false assumptions upon which the popular conception of 'free will' rests:
 1. that each of us could have behaved differently than we did in the past
 2. that we are the conscious source of most of our thoughts and actions in the present

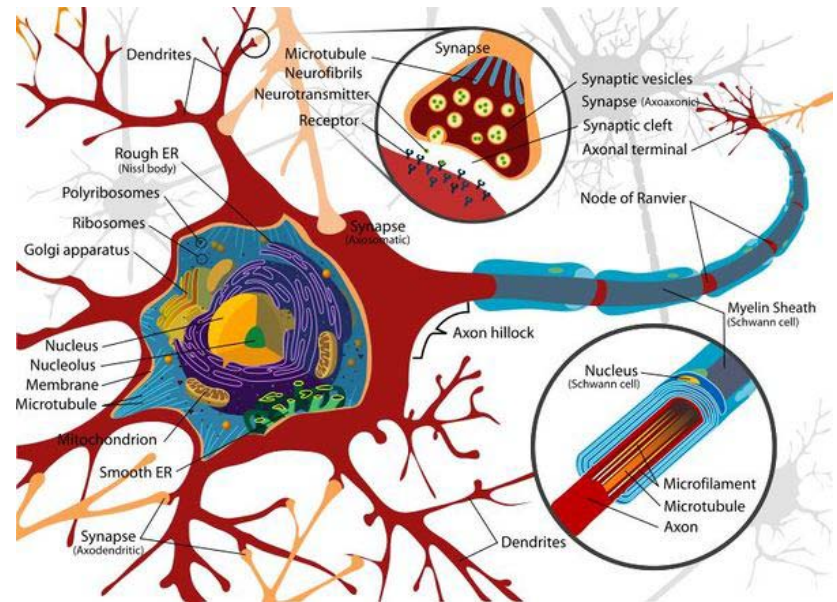


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1. Could we have behaved differently?

- For Harris, having ‘free will’ means not being restricted by the laws of physics. He illustrates with the case of rapists and murderers:

“To say that they were free not to rape and murder is to say that they could have resisted the impulse to do so (or could have avoided feeling such an impulse altogether)—with the universe, including their brains, in precisely the same state it was in at the moment they committed their crimes.”

[2012: 17]

- For Harris, having ‘free will’ entails replaying the tape and sometimes getting a different outcome.

1. Could we have behaved differently?

Compatibilist Analysis

- Two senses of x 'could have' done otherwise:
 1. unconditional sense (infrequent): x 's alternative action is (somewhat) immune from the laws of physics, initial conditions and causal necessity
 2. conditional sense (usual): x 's alternative action is deducible from the laws of physics, x 's capabilities and different conditions
- In saying x could have freely chosen otherwise, we are using the second, conditional sense of 'could have'.

1. Could we have behaved differently?

Example

- Writing about the Mercedes-AMG One hypercar's breaking of the production car record at the Nürburgring, sports writer Andrew Frankel observed:



Attribution: Photo by Isaac Maffei on Unsplash

“Not least because the car could have gone faster still.”

[Frankel, Andrew 2022. AMG One Rules the Nürburgring, *The Intercooler*,
<https://www.the-intercooler.com/library/blog/amg-one-rules-the-ring/>]

1. Could we have behaved differently?

Example

- Frankel did *not* mean that if the race organizers were able to repeatedly wind the clock back precisely to the point in time at which the race started, with some of these wind backs the car could have broken the laws of physics to go faster than it did. That interpretation is nonsense.
- Frankel did mean that the car had the *capability* to go faster than it actually did; that if the external conditions had been different, it would have done so.

“The time was set at the end of October in far from optimal conditions for such an exercise. The track temperature was lower than the tyres would have liked and the surface both damp and dirty in certain key places.”

[Frankel, Andrew 2022. AMG One Rules the Nürburgring, *The Intercooler*, <https://www.the-intercooler.com/library/blog/amg-one-rules-the-ring/>]

1. Could we have behaved differently?

More Examples

“The car could have gone faster on jet power alone . . .”

[Williams-Smith, Jake 2020. Land Speed Record in Sight for Bloodhound after Successful 2019 in South Africa, *Motor Sport Magazine*, <https://www.motorsportmagazine.com/articles/land-speed-records/land-speed-record-in-sight-for-bloodhound-after-successful-2019-in-south-africa/>]

“The car could have gone faster, but it would have gone airborne in the turns.”

[Schmitt, Bertel 2021. 141.73 Mph, 100 Years Ago: A Pictorial History of the Blitzen-Benz, *The Truth About Cars*, <https://www.thetruthaboutcars.com/2011/06/141-73-mpg-100-years-ago-the-pictorial-history-of-the-blitzen-benz/>]

“Hurricane Katrina could have killed more people than the Galveston hurricane did.”

“Falling branch 'could have killed more', claims grieving family”

“Cal Fire spokesman Richard Cordova could not confirm early evacuation details but said that given the speed of the fire, the death toll could have been much higher.”

[Cited in Allan, Leslie 2021. Free Will and Compatibilism, *RationalRealm.com*, <https://www.rationalrealm.com/philosophy/metaphysics/freewill-compatibilism.html>]

1. Could we have behaved differently?

Applied to Harris' Example

- To say that some rapists and murderers *could have* resisted the impulse to rape and murder is to say that they *were capable* of not raping and murdering. That is, they had the capacity to weigh their options, regulate their emotions, plan with foresight, understand the consequences of their actions, and so on.
- As with a racing car absent a serious mechanical malfunction, a criminal likewise 'could have' done otherwise if they were not suffering some cognitive, conative or affective malfunction such as a brain tumour, mental illness, addiction, brainwashing, and so on.

1. Could we have behaved differently?

- Harris' dismissive response

“Compatibilists have produced a vast literature in an effort to finesse this problem. More than in any other area of academic philosophy, the result resembles theology”

[2012: 18]

- Harris' later back flips

“. . . we are **free** to interpret and **reinterpret** the meaning of our lives . . . We **can** pursue any line of thought we want.” [emphasis mine]

[2012: 33]

“Our system of justice should reflect an understanding that any of us **could have** been dealt a very different hand in life.” [emphasis mine]

[2012: 42]

- Harris' later concession to Daniel Dennett

“Yes, there are two readings of “could”—and you find only one of them interesting.”

[Harris, Sam 2014. The Marionette's Lament: A Response to Daniel Dennett, *Making Sense*, <https://www.samharris.org/blog/the-marionettes-lament>]



Progress So Far

- Harris argues against two supposed key false assumptions supporting 'free will':
 1. that each of us could have behaved differently than we did in the past
 - Harris ignores the conditional sense of 'could have' done otherwise ✓
 2. that we are the conscious source of most of our thoughts and actions in the present
 - argument from introspection
 - argument from neuroscience

2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

- Harris' first argument from introspection:

“Seeming acts of volition merely arise spontaneously (whether caused, uncaused, or probabilistically inclined, it makes no difference) and cannot be traced to a point of origin in our conscious minds. A moment or two of serious self-scrutiny, and you might observe that you no more decide the next thought you think than the next thought I write.”

[2012: 10]

“But where intentions themselves come from, and what determines their character in every instance, remains perfectly mysterious in subjective terms. . . . We do not know what we intend to do until the intention itself arises.”

[2012: 14]

2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

- BUT reflection shows we *can* decide our next thought and intention
 - I *can* decide that my next thought will be about the first house I bought.
 - I *can* resolve that tomorrow I will work on an overdue project.
 - To relieve my discomfort in the dentist's chair, I distract myself with thoughts of my favourite artist.
- BUT reflection shows we *can* know the source of some of our intentions
 - I know my intention to eat my lunch came from my feeling of hunger.
- BUT reflection shows we *can* know what we intend before the intention arises
 - I know when I awake tomorrow morning I will intend to get out of bed.

2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

- Harris' second argument from neuroscience:

“More recently, direct recordings from the cortex showed that the activity of merely 256 neurons was sufficient to predict with 80 percent accuracy a person's decision to move 700 milliseconds before he became aware of it. . . . Some moments before you are aware of what you will do next—a time in which you subjectively appear to have complete freedom to behave however you please—your brain has already determined what you will do.”

[2012: 12]

- 80% accuracy is not proof of determinism; leaves plenty of wriggle room for indeterminism (see Sapolsky's *Determinism* for complications in interpretation)
- Many real-life decisions are not simple button pressing (e.g., deciding whether to move house, choosing the best school for your daughter involves reflection and weighing reasons over an extended period of time)



2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

- Harris' second argument from neuroscience:

“... the fact that someone else could report what you were about to think and do would expose this feeling [of free will] for what it is: an *illusion*. If the laws of nature do not strike most of us as incompatible with free will, that is because we have not imagined how human behavior would appear if all cause-and-effect relationships were understood.”

[2012: 13]

- BUT 59.2% of professional philosophers see no incompatibility; only 11.2% agree with Harris [Bourget & Chalmers 2023. Philosophers on Philosophy: The 2020 PhilPapers Survey, *Philosophers' Imprint* 23/11]
- Harris assumes without argument or doing an ordinary language analysis that 'free' in 'free will' means 'wholly or partly uncaused' [for such an analysis, see Allan, Leslie 2021. Free Will and Compatibilism, *RationalRealm.com*, <https://www.rationalrealm.com/philosophy/metaphysics/freewill-compatibilism.html>]

2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

What Does 'free' Mean Anyway?

'free thought'



Attribution: Allan Ramsay [Public domain]

'free market'

'free hand' drawing



Attribution: Photo by Sincerely Media on Unsplash

'free skating'

'free range' chicken



Attribution: Photo by Zachariah Smith on Unsplash

'free evening'

'free fall'



Attribution: Photo by Kamil Pietrzak on Unsplash

'free mind'

'free pass'

'free competition'

- In none of these phrases, does 'free' signify 'uncaused', 'undetermined' or 'underdetermined'. How so for 'free will'? Harris fails to explain.

2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

- Both Harris' **argument from introspection** and **argument from neuroscience** intend to show how we are puppets dancing to the tune of unconscious brain process beyond our control.
- For Harris, we have no genuine agency:

“The choice was made for me by events in my brain . . .”

[2012: 21]

“People feel (or presume) an authorship of their thoughts and actions that is illusory.”

[2012: 21]

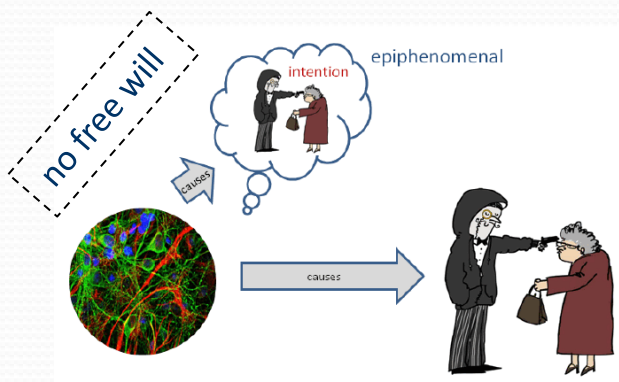
“There is no question that our attribution of agency can be gravely in error. I am arguing that it always is.”

[2012: 22]

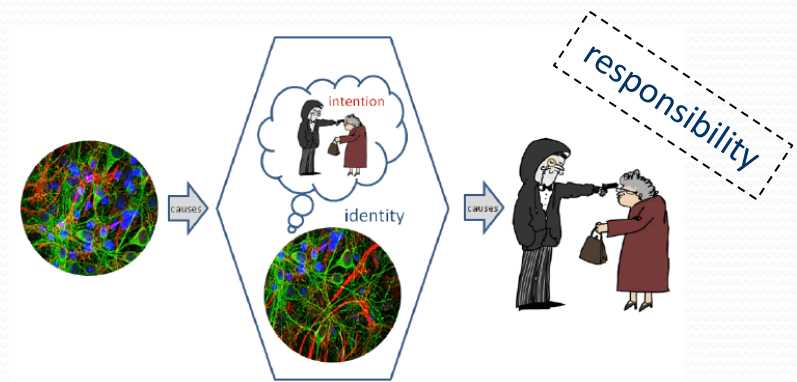
2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

- Harris relies on this 'helpless puppet' view of the mind to bolster his disproof of free will.
- BUT he advances a contrasting view when defending:
 - the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions
 - how we are morally responsible for our actions

Harris v. 1 'helpless puppet' view

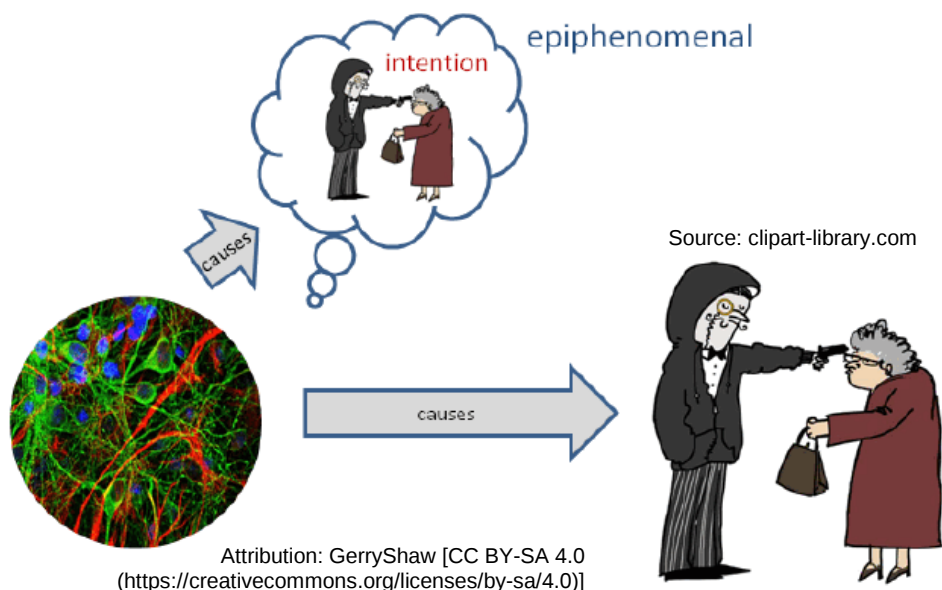


Harris v. 2 "rational agent" view



2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

Harris v. 1 — epiphenomenalist theory of mind (helpless puppet)



“Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no conscious control.” [2012: 9]

“Seeming acts of volition merely arise spontaneously . . . and cannot be traced to a point of origin in our conscious minds.” [2012: 10]

“Did I consciously choose tea over coffee? No. The choice was made for me by events in my brain that I, as the conscious witness of my thoughts and actions, could not inspect or influence.” [2012: 11]

“But where intentions themselves come from, and what determines their character in every instance, remains perfectly mysterious in subjective terms.” [2012: 14]

“The intention to do one thing and not another does not originate in consciousness—rather, it appears in consciousness, as does any thought or impulse that might oppose it.” [2012: 11]

“What will my next mental state be? I do not know—it just happens.” [2012: 12]

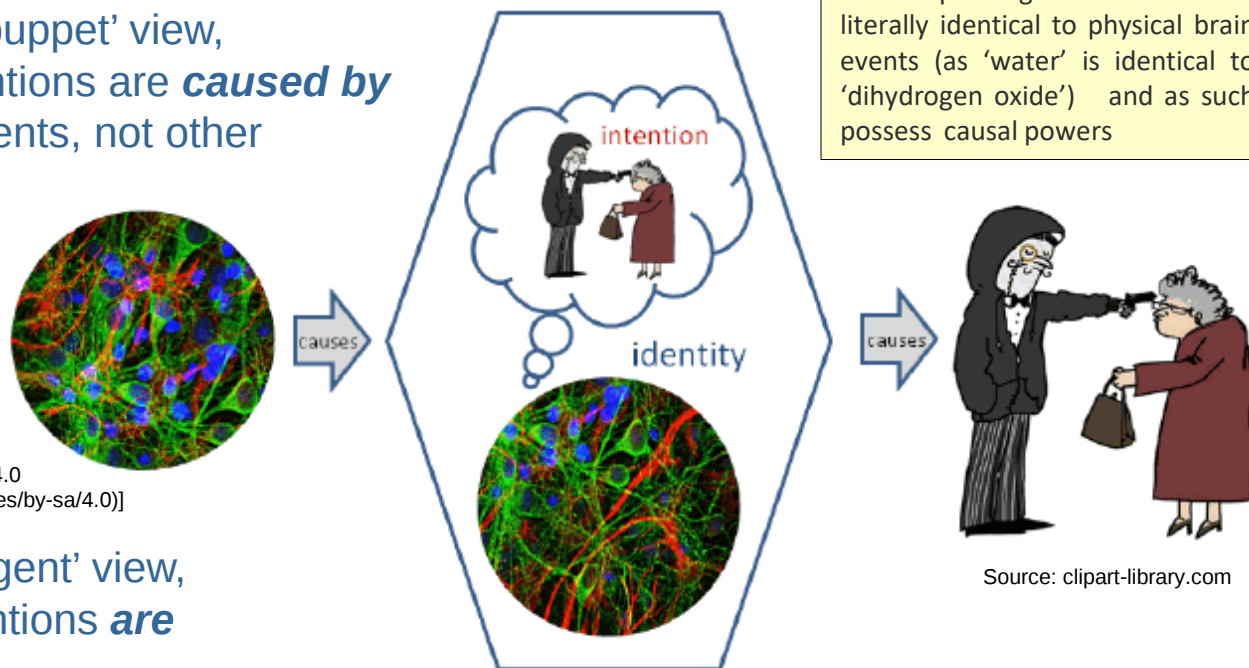
“My mental life is simply given to me by the cosmos.” [2012: 19]

‘Epiphenomenalism’ = theory of mind positing mental events have no causal powers; simply inert by-products of physical brain processes

2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

Harris v. 2 — Identity Theory of Mind (rational agent)

- On v. 1 ‘helpless puppet’ view, thoughts and intentions are **caused by** unknown brain events, not other mental events.



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- On v. 2 ‘rational agent’ view, thoughts and intentions **are** physical events:

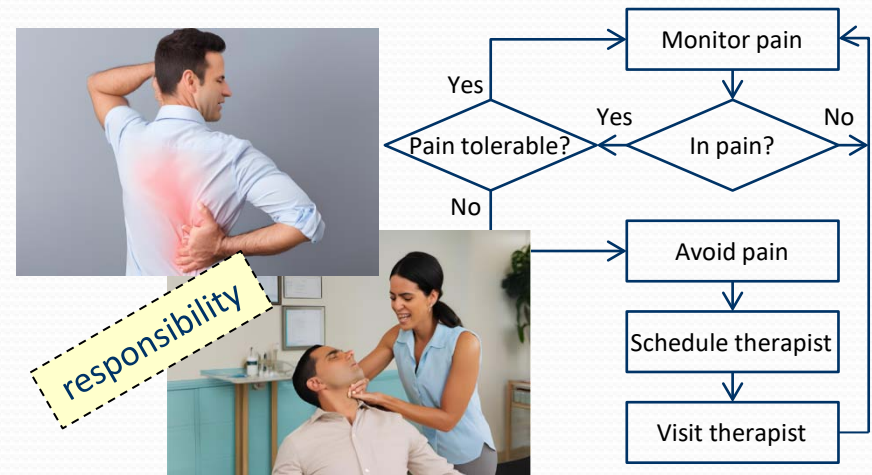
“My choice to write it [*Free Will*] was unquestionably the primary cause of its coming into being. Decisions, intentions, efforts, goals, willpower, etc., **are causal states of the brain**, leading to specific behaviors, and behaviors lead to outcomes in the world.” [2012: 29] [emphasis mine]

2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

Harris v. 1 'helpless puppet' view



Harris v. 2 'rational agent' view



- Harris' passive psychological state

"What will my next mental state be? I do not know—it just happens" [2012: 12]

"My mental life is simply given to me by the cosmos." [2012: 19]

- Harris' active psychological state

"I might unconsciously shift in my seat, but I cannot unconsciously decide that the pain in my back warrants a trip to a physical therapist. To do the latter, I must become aware of the pain and be consciously motivated to do something about it." [2012: 28]

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2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

- Harris explicitly walks back his v. 1 'helpless puppet' view by assuming that imagining (a kind of 'thought') causes other thoughts.

"If the laws of nature do not strike most of us as incompatible with free will, that is because we have not imagined how human behavior would appear if all cause-and-effect relationships were understood."

[2012: 13]

"Imagine what your life would be like if all your actions, intentions, beliefs, and desires were randomly "self-generated" in this way. You would scarcely seem to have a mind at all."

[2012: 25]

- If Harris did not think the mental state of imagining would bring about a new belief/mental state, then why ask the reader to engage in his proposed imagining?



2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

- Harris does more walking back from v. 1 ‘helpless puppet’ view

“Seeming acts of volition merely arise spontaneously” [2012: 10]

“What will my next mental state be? I do not know—it just happens. [2012: 12]

“But where intentions themselves come from . . . remains perfectly mysterious in subjective terms.” [2012: 14]

- to v. 2 ‘rational agent’ view

“And we know that the brain systems that allow us to reflect upon our experience are different from those involved when we automatically react to stimuli.”

[2012: 28]

“Actions, intentions, beliefs, and desires can exist only in a system that is significantly constrained by patterns of behavior and the laws of stimulus-response. The possibility of reasoning with other human beings—or, indeed, of finding their behaviors and utterances comprehensible at all—depends on the assumption that their thoughts and actions will obediently ride the rails of a shared reality.”

[2012: 24]



2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

Harris' Three Paradoxes

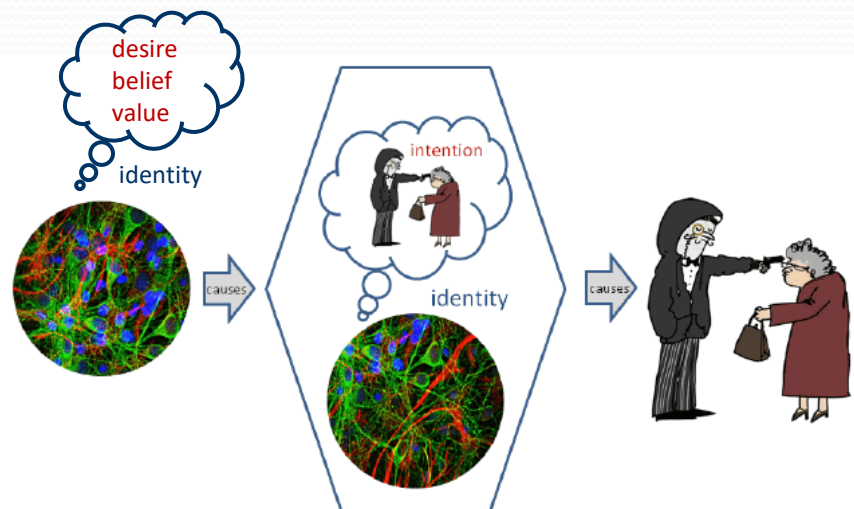
Harris' flip-flopping from one view to its opposite throughout his book generates three debilitating paradoxes:

- i. Paradox of Mental Causation
- ii. Paradox of Reasons
- iii. Paradox of Freedom

2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

i. Harris' Paradox of Mental Causation

- If our intentions are now causal states of our brain (Harris v. 2), then why can't some of those intentions be caused by previous brain states that are identical to previous mental states?
- Mental events (decisions, intentions, efforts, goals) then are no longer causally inert as per Harris v. 1 'helpless puppet' view.
- This explains why our choices, as felt subjectively, do not appear to "arise spontaneously" in a "perfectly mysterious" way as Harris had posited.
- Harris' disproof of free will (based on the supposed fact that we are not the conscious source of our thoughts and actions) therefore fails.



2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

ii. Harris' Paradox of Reasons

Harris v. 1 'helpless puppet' view

“. . . because a person's "choices" merely appear in his mind as though **sprung from the void**. . . . You might be able to **tell a story** about how your life unraveled, but you **cannot truly account** for why you let it happen.” [2012: 29]

“You might have **a story to tell** about why things were different this time around, but it would be nothing more than a **post hoc description** of events that you did not control.” [2012: 31]

“Of course, I could **tell a story** about why I'm doing what I'm doing . . . but the actual explanation for my behavior is **hidden from me**.” [2012: 35] [emphasis mine]

Harris v. 2 'rational agent' view

“The possibility of **reasoning** with other human beings—or, indeed, of finding their behaviors and utterances **comprehensible** at all—depends on the assumption that their thoughts and actions will obediently ride the rails of a shared reality.” [2012: 24]

“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).” [2012: 37]

“Because what we do subsequent to conscious planning **tends to most fully reflect** the global properties of our minds—our beliefs, desires, goals, prejudices, etc.” [2012: 40] [emphasis mine]

- On Harris' own account, if his decision to reject the notion of free will is simply “a story” he tells himself and others that is nothing but a “*post hoc*” rationalization that “sprung from the void”, then why ought we pay his arguments any attention? Why ought we pay attention to any of his reasons he gives for holding any of his beliefs and for making any of his decisions?

2. Are we the source of our thoughts?

iii. Harris' Paradox of Freedom

Harris v. 1 'helpless puppet' view

"My mental life is simply given to me by the cosmos."
[2012: 19]

"Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert **no conscious control**."
[2012: 9]

"What will my next mental state be? I do not know—it **just happens**."
[2012: 12] [emphasis mine]



Harris v. 2 'rational agent' view

"Becoming sensitive to the background causes of one's thoughts and feelings can—paradoxically—allow for greater **creative control** over one's life.

...

This understanding reveals you to be a biochemical puppet, of course, but it also allows you to **grab hold of one of your strings**." [2012: 37] [emphasis mine]

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Conclusion

- With these three paradoxes (explicit internal contradictions)
 - i. Paradox of Mental Causation
 - ii. Paradox of Reasons
 - iii. Paradox of Freedom

Harris' argument against the assumption

(1.) *that we are not the conscious source of our thoughts and actions* **fails**.

- With Harris' lack of response to the persuasive conditional sense of 'could have', his argument against the assumption
(2.) *that each of us could have behaved differently than we did in the past* **also fails**.
- Harris' case against free will **fails**.

Leslie Allan's 4C Theory

- Four requirements for an agent's intention to be free:
 1. Compulsion
 - absence of feeling compelled by the agent's situation
 2. Control
 - absence of control by a third party
 3. Character
 - consonant with the agent's character and highest-order desires
 4. Cognition
 - cognitive capability to deliberate and offer reasons for action

Freedom of the will is a characteristic of an autonomous, conscious agent who can reason and deliberate about alternative courses of action. Such a person is constituted by their character and that within the bounds of this character, the agent faces a range of options on how to act in a given situation. When this range is encumbered or restricted by either subverting the person's character or compromising their capacity for rational deliberation and action, the person's freedom is diminished.

[Allan, Leslie 2021. Free Will and Compatibilism, *RationalRealm.com*, <https://www.rationalrealm.com/philosophy/metaphysics/freewill-compatibilism.html>]

Reasons for Compatibilism

1. Etymology of “free will” as constrained will
2. Lexicography of “free will”
3. Analysis of ordinary usage cases
4. Paradigm cases: arranged marriage, stealing wallet, etc
5. “Free” modifiers: “free range”, “free hand”, etc
6. Natural deterministic entities CHDO: hurricanes, falling branch, etc
7. Free will is not illusory
8. ‘4C theory’ of Free Will
9. CHDO: Character-based analysis

[Allan, Leslie 2021. Free Will and Compatibilism, *RationalRealm.com*,
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