

SUMMARY

FREE WILL

SAM HARRIS



Summary of “Free Will” by Sam Harris

Written by Lea Schullery

Learn How Free Will is All An Illusion and How You
Cannot Control Your Thoughts and Actions

Introduction	5
Free Will is An Illusion	7
While You May Not Have Free Will, You Can Control Your Decisions	9
Believing Free Will is An Illusion Doesn't Mean You Should Give Up	11
The Absence of Free Will Affects Our Views of Criminals and Politicians	12
Final Summary	14



QuickRead

F R E E B O O K S U M M A R I E S

Go to QuickRead.com/App now to download our app and get access to thousands of free book summaries as both text and audiobooks.

Get the key insights of non-fiction books in minutes instead of hours. Listen to our free audiobooks while you workout or on your commute to work.



Introduction

What if I told you free will was just an illusion? That our ability to make decisions emerges from a place in which we have no conscious control. That we do not have the freedom we think we have. If this were the case, then sinners and criminals would simply be the victims of “poorly calibrated clockwork.” On the other hand, those who work hard and follow the rules wouldn’t necessarily *deserve* their success. Let’s take a look at the case of Steven Hayes and Joshua Komisarjevsky, two career criminals who entered the home of Dr. William and Jennifer Petit in the early morning of July 23, 2007. Upon entering the home, the two found Dr. Petit asleep on the sofa in the sunroom. Komisarjevsky stood over the man, hesitated, and then struck him in the head with a baseball bat. He then claimed that the victim’s screams triggered him to bludgeon Petit even more until he fell silent. Next, the two bound his hands and feet and went upstairs to search the rest of the house.

Upstairs, they found Jennifer Petit and her daughters - Hayley, 17, and Michaela, 11 - still asleep. They woke the three and immediately tied them to their beds. Then, at 7:00 a.m., Hayes drove Petit to the bank to withdraw \$15,000 in cash. When Hayes returned to the home with Jennifer and the cash, the two criminals wondered what they should do next, and decided that Hayes would take Jennifer into the living room and rape her. Afterward, he strangled her. At this point, the two men noticed William Petit had escaped. In a panic, the two doused the house in gasoline and set it ablaze. The only survivor of the attack was William. When the police asked the two why they hadn’t untied the girls upstairs before setting the house on fire, Komisarjevsky said, “It just didn’t cross my mind.” When we hear stories like these, we immediately feel that the criminals should be held responsible for their actions, and giving them the death penalty would be completely justified. We don’t care that Hayes has since shown remorse and has even attempted suicide. We don’t care that Komisarjevsky was repeatedly raped as a child and that he was stunned by his own behavior that day at the Petit home. He hadn’t intended to kill anyone that day, he

only intended to rob the place. Whatever their conscious motives, these men don't know why they are the way they are. Similarly, we don't know why we are not like them. Author Sam Harris states, "I cannot take credit for the fact that I do not have the soul of a psychopath." This leads us to the question of, *how can we make sense of our lives? How can we hold people accountable for their choices, given the unconscious origins of our conscious minds? Is free will just an illusion?* If a man's choice to shoot the president is determined by a certain pattern of neural activity, like an unfortunate coincidence of bad genes, an unhappy childhood, and a lack of sleep, then is that man's will really *free*? Sam Harris aims to answer these questions and help us understand how our minds work. So if you're ready for the journey, then keep reading.

Free Will is An Illusion

When you wake up each morning, what's your routine? Do you drink coffee? Tea? Do you believe this decision is something you make based on your own free will? The answer is no. The choice was made for you by the events in your brain that you could not inspect or influence. You may be thinking, "Couldn't I just change my mind?" Sure, you can switch from coffee to tea one morning, but that impulse would simply be the product of unconscious causes. Decisions like these don't originate from your conscious mind; in fact, you don't know what you intend to do until you actually do it.

"Physiologist Benjamin Libet famously used EEG to show that activity in the brain's motor cortex can be detected some 300 milliseconds before a person feels that he has decided to move." In other words, your brain signals movement before you even decide to move. Another study used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to further study this phenomenon. In the study, subjects were asked to press one of two buttons while watching a "clock" composed of a random sequence of letters. The participants reported which letter was visible at the precise moment they decided to press a button. The study revealed that two regions of the brain contained information about which button subjects would press about 7 to 10 seconds *before* the decision was consciously made.

In other words, a few moments before you are aware of what you are about to do, your brain has already determined it. This means that free will is all an illusion. We have no control over our brain activity. Think about it, can you decide what your next thought or intention will be? Can you predict your future mental state? No, it just happens. Furthermore, the brain itself is a physical system, which means changes in its functional state and material structure will dictate our thoughts and actions. In other words, you are not in control. This is especially true for those who wish they could behave or feel differently. For example, millions of committed Christians happen to be gay and others are prone to obesity. You see, the part of your

brain that allows you to stay on your diet is just as mysterious as the one that tempts you to eat cake for breakfast!

Our thoughts are simply a result of our deep biological processes that we cannot control. Think about everything that would need to happen for you to actually have free will. First, you would need to be conscious of all the factors that help determine your thoughts and actions. Next, you would need to have complete control over those factors. This is simply impossible. Therefore, you are not controlling the storm in your mind. Instead, you *are* the storm.

While You May Not Have Free Will, You Can Control Your Decisions

While our thoughts and actions are controlled by brain processes, we do have awareness and consciousness which allows us to think deliberately. For example, you have the power to focus your thoughts and what you pay attention to. Say you are sitting at your desk getting some work done when a leaf blower begins to sound loudly outside your window. You can try and put the sound out of your mind by focusing on something else, like work. Within certain limits, you can choose what you pay attention to.

For example, you might unconsciously shift in your seat because you feel pain in your back; however, you can't unconsciously decide that the pain warrants a trip to a physical therapist. To do that, you would need to become aware of the pain and make the conscious decision yourself. When you feel something like pain, you can be motivated to do something about it. You as the conscious person did not create the pain, it simply appeared. Similarly, the thoughts that led to you to consider therapy appeared as well. This is a process considered conscious deliberation and is not the same as free will.

You may be thinking, "If everything is predetermined, then I can simply do nothing," right? Wrong. If you simply sit back and watch what happens, you'll create even more consequences and problems. In fact, sitting back and doing nothing is incredibly difficult. Try staying in bed all day waiting for something to happen; you'll eventually become overwhelmed by the impulse to get up and do something. Instead, our choices depend on prior causes. For example, the author Sam Harris made the choice to write a book, which became the primary cause for bringing it into being. A person's *choices* merely appear in the mind as though sprung from the void.

Let's say you've let yourself go a bit. While you used to be motivated, inspired, and physically fit, you are now lazy, discouraged, and overweight. How did you get this way? While you may tell yourself a story of how your

life turned off-track, you cannot truly know why you let this happen. Suddenly though, you want to change yourself. So you begin reading self-help books, eating healthy, going to the gym, and even going back to school. Unfortunately, you find your new schedule impossible to maintain and you eventually fall off the wagon...again. But one morning, you wake up with a renewed sense of purpose. You think *enough is enough!*

Before getting out of bed, your mind fills with a brilliant idea for a website. Then, you discover the domain name is available for just \$10! You feel confident. You're an entrepreneur! You share the idea with others and they all think your idea is guaranteed to make you rich. You then consult a lifestyle coach and fitness guru who will help you swap 20 pounds of fat for 20 pounds of muscle over the next 4 months. Your friends are impressed and begin seeking your advice. You realize that your discipline, choice, and effort have all made a difference in your life. But where did the idea for your website come from? "It just appeared in your mind. Did *you*, as the conscious agent you feel yourself to be, *create it?*"

If you pay attention to your inner life, you'll see that your choices, efforts, and intentions are all a mysterious process. Sure, you can decide to go on a diet, but you cannot know why you were finally able to stick with it this time around. You might tell yourself a story about why it was different this time, but it's nothing more than just a series of events outside of your control. In the end, you are not in control of your mind because you are only *part* of your mind. "You can do what you decide to do - but you cannot decide what you will decide to do."

Believing Free Will is An Illusion Doesn't Mean You Should Give Up

Some people worry that if we adopt the notion that free will is an illusion, then we will fail to live creative and fulfilling lives. Of course, this idea isn't completely unfounded. In fact, one study found that when subjects read an argument against the existence of free will, they were more likely to cheat on the exam that followed. Another study found subjects to be less helpful and more aggressive. For Harris, however, losing his sense of free will has only improved his ethics, compassion, and forgiveness. On the other hand, Harris recognizes that accepting free will as an illusion isn't always desirable.

For example, imagine teaching a self-defense class for women. It would be pretty counterproductive to emphasize that human behavior is all determined by the universe, and that rapists are simply victims of prior causes that they did not create. Harris recognizes there are scientific, ethical, and practical truths appropriate for every occasion. And teaching women to defend themselves against those who wish to harm them can still have positive outcomes. Therefore, believing that everything is predetermined doesn't have to lead to a life of fear; instead, it can help free yourself.

When you can understand your thoughts and feelings, you can take back control of your life. Say you bicker with your wife because you're in a bad mood; however, if you recognize that your mood and behavior have been caused by low blood sugar, then you can take the necessary steps to change that. It allows you to grab hold of something seemingly outside your control by taking a bite of food to improve your personality. When you can get behind your conscious thoughts and feelings, you can steer a more intelligent course through your life, even if you know that you are ultimately being steered.

The Absence of Free Will Affects Our Views of Criminals and Politicians

When you believe in free will, you also believe in the religious concept of *sin*. In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court considers free will a “universal and persistent” foundation for our system of law. According to the justice system, people have the free will to commit crimes and should be punished as a result. However, this notion depends upon people being able to freely choose how to think and act, something we have already proven to be false. Therefore, shouldn't we change how we view crime and punishment?

What prevents you from going to the store and stealing as much as you can? On any given day, you are simply keeping in line with your thoughts, intentions, beliefs, and desires. If one day you end up going to the store intent on stealing as many items as possible, you would feel that your behavior was out of character or that you were out of your mind. In other words, you would not feel responsible for those actions. Let's take a look at a few of the following scenarios:

- A four-year-old boy playing with his father's loaded gun kills a young woman.
- A 12-year-old boy who has been the victim of physical and emotional abuse intentionally takes his father's gun and kills a young woman who was teasing him.
- A 25-year-old man who has also been a victim of child abuse intentionally killed his girlfriend after she left him for another man.
- A 25-year-old man who has had a normal childhood with loving parents kills a young woman he never met “just for the fun of it.” An MRI of the man's brain reveals a tumor the size of a golf ball in his medial prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for the control of emotion and behavioral impulses.

In each case, a young woman lost her life as a result of events arising in the brain of another human being. However, the moral outrage we feel depends

on the background conditions of each case. For instance, we cannot fathom that a four-year-old can truly kill someone on purpose. In the first two cases, we believe the killer is not yet fully mature; therefore, they cannot be fully responsible for their actions. Similarly, the history of abuse seems to lessen the man's guilt. Finally, the brain tumor also somehow gives the man an excuse for killing and is no longer fully responsible for his crime.

When we abandon the concept of free will, we begin to recognize that criminals aren't much different from one another, whether we believe they are responsible for their actions or not. In reality, the killer with no history of abuse lacks free will just like a killer with a cancerous tumor. For this reason, we should stop seeking justice through punishment and retribution. Instead, our society should begin focusing on deterrence or rehabilitation.

Of course, the absence of free will doesn't just affect our criminal justice system, it plays a role in politics as well. While liberals tend to understand that a person is either lucky or unlucky, conservatives often argue the religious notion of individualism. These politicians have absolutely no awareness of how fortunate one must be to succeed at anything in life. In reality, "one must be lucky to be able to work. One must be lucky to be intelligent, physically healthy, and not bankrupted in middle age by the illness of a spouse." That's because not one person on earth has chosen his genome, country of birth, or political or economic conditions that helped him find success. Even the success of "self-made millionaires" is dependent on the person's unique genetic makeup and the particular experiences and privileges that helped them get to where they are.

Once we, as a society, break the spell of free will, we can begin to hold people responsible for what happens in their corner of the universe. "Where people can change, we can demand that they do so. Where change is impossible, we can chart some other course. In improving ourselves and society, we are working directly with the forces of nature, for there is nothing but nature itself to work with."

Final Summary

The concept of free will continues to be a compelling mystery. On one hand, we can't understand it scientifically, on the other, we feel as if we are the authors of our own thoughts and actions. According to Sam Harris, free will isn't simply an illusion; instead, our experience is merely a distorted view of reality. In other words, our experiences are not what we think. "Not only are we not as free as we think we are - we do not feel as free as we think we do." If we can just pay attention to what it's like to be us, then it becomes possible to see that free will is an illusion. Thoughts and intentions simply arise in the mind and we are not in control. For these reasons, we need society to adapt to the notion that free will does not exist so that we can further help one another and create a better world.



QuickRead

F R E E B O O K S U M M A R I E S

Go to QuickRead.com/App now to download our app and get access to thousands of free book summaries as both text and audiobooks.

Get the key insights of non-fiction books in minutes instead of hours. Listen to our free audiobooks while you workout or on your commute to work.

