




FREE WILL

SAM HARRIS

New York Times bestselling author
of *The End of Faith*



“Free will is an illusion so convincing that people simply refuse to believe that we don’t have it. In *Free Will*, Sam Harris combines neuroscience and psychology to lay this illusion to rest at last. Like all of Harris’s books, this one will not only unsettle you but make you think deeply. Read it: you have

no choice.”

—JERRY A. COYNE, Professor of Ecology and Evolution, University of Chicago, and author of *Why Evolution Is True*

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.

“In this elegant and provocative book, Sam Harris demonstrates—with great intellectual ferocity and panache—that free will is an inherently flawed and incoherent concept, even in subjective terms. If he is right,

the book will radically change the way we view ourselves as human beings.”

—V. S. RAMACHANDRAN, Director of the Center for Brain and Cognition, UCSD, and author of *The Tell-Tale Brain*

“Brilliant and witty—and never less than incisive— *Free Will* shows that Sam Harris can say more in 13,000 words than most people do in 100,000.”

—OLIVER SACKS

“Many say that believing that there is no free will is impossible—or, if possible, will cause nihilism and despair. In this feisty and personal essay, Harris offers himself as an example of a heart made less self-absorbed, and

more morally sensitive and creative, because this particular wicked witch is

dead.”

—OWEN FLANAGAN, Professor of Philosophy, Duke University, and author of *The Really Hard Problem*

“If you believe in free will, or know someone who does, here is the perfect antidote. In this smart, engaging, and extremely readable little book, Sam Harris argues that free will doesn’t exist, that we’re better off knowing that it doesn’t exist, and that—once we think about it in the right way—we can

appreciate from our own experience that it doesn’t exist. This is a delightful discussion by one of the sharpest scholars around.”

—PAUL BLOOM, Professor of Psychology, Yale University, and author of *How Pleasure Works*



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SAM HARRIS is the author of the bestselling books *The End of Faith*, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, *The Moral Landscape*, and *Lying*. *The End of*

***Faith* won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction. His writing has been published in over fifteen languages. Dr. Harris and his work have been discussed in *The New York Times*, *Scientific American*, *Nature*, *Rolling Stone*,**

***Newsweek*, *Time*, and many other publications. His writing has appeared in**

The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Times* (London), *The Boston

***Globe*, *The Atlantic*, *Newsweek*, *Annals of Neurology*, and elsewhere. Dr.**

Harris is cofounder and CEO of Project Reason, a nonprofit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society. He

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Also by Sam Harris

The End of Faith

Letter to a Christian Nation

The Moral Landscape

Lying

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FREE WILL

The question of free will touches nearly everything we care about. Morality, law, politics, religion, public policy, intimate relationships, feelings of guilt and personal accomplishment—most of what is distinctly *human* about our lives seems to depend upon our viewing one another as autonomous persons, capable

of free choice. If the scientific community were to declare free will an illusion, it would precipitate a culture war far more belligerent than the one that has been waged on the subject of evolution. Without free will, sinners and criminals would be nothing more than poorly calibrated clockwork, and any conception of

justice that emphasized punishing them (rather than deterring, rehabilitating, or merely containing them) would appear utterly incongruous. And those of us who

work hard and follow the rules would not “deserve” our success in any deep sense. It is not an accident that most people find these conclusions abhorrent.

The stakes are high.

In the early morning of July 23, 2007, Steven Hayes and Joshua

Komisarjevsky, two career criminals, arrived at the home of Dr. William and Jennifer Petit in Cheshire, a quiet town in central Connecticut. They found Dr.

Petit asleep on a sofa in the sunroom. According to his taped confession, Komisarjevsky stood over the sleeping man for some minutes, hesitating, before

striking him in the head with a baseball bat. He claimed that his victim’s screams then triggered something within him, and he bludgeoned Petit with all his strength until he fell silent.

The two then bound Petit’s hands and feet and went upstairs to search the rest

of the house. They discovered Jennifer Petit and her daughters—Hayley, 17, and

Michaela, 11—still asleep. They woke all three and immediately tied them to their beds.

At 7:00 a.m., Hayes went to a gas station and bought four gallons of gasoline.

At 9:30, he drove Jennifer Petit to her bank to withdraw \$15,000 in cash. The conversation between Jennifer and the bank teller suggests that she was unaware

of her husband's injuries and believed that her captors would release her family

unharmd.

While Hayes and the girls' mother were away, Komisarjevsky amused himself

by taking naked photos of Michaela with his cell phone and masturbating on her.

When Hayes returned with Jennifer, the two men divided up the money and briefly considered what they should do. They decided that Hayes should take

Jennifer into the living room and rape her—which he did. He then strangled her, to the apparent surprise of his partner.

At this point, the two men noticed that William Petit had slipped his bonds and escaped. They began to panic. They quickly doused the house with gasoline

and set it on fire. When asked by the police why he hadn't untied the two girls