

## Book Review: Free Will | British Politics and Policy at LSE

*Katie Saffin finds that enormous ground is covered in Joseph Keim Campbell's recent exploration into the philosophy of free will.*

**Free Will.** Joseph Keim Campbell. [Polity](#). March 2011.

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The nature of free will and its classical definition, that a person has free will only if he is able to do otherwise, is finely dissected in the latest book from Joseph Keim Campbell, who is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at [Washington State University](#). This book helps us understand the sometimes stark and sometimes more subtle differences in the definitions of free will. Campbell's background is in epistemology, the theory of knowledge, and here he finds that "the problems of epistemological skepticism and free will skepticism have more in common than one might think".

Campbell wants the reader to understand the importance and consequences of denying free will, and if such a stance is taken what that means for creativity, authenticity, and origination, as well as moral responsibility and our concept of the self. He points out that to deny free will would mean that no-one is morally responsible for anything and that this is in conflict with our general understanding of the world and our structure of society. He reminds us that any notion of free will is however far from simplistic and will always create problems that demand difficult answers. These debates about moral responsibility and whether someone is responsible for their actions if they could not have done otherwise or if the idea that "one is morally responsible for an action only if the act is praiseworthy or blameworthy" are extremely relevant to society today, most obviously within the law, but also within our everyday lives and the workplace, as we constantly redefine how we apportion blame and what the nature of the redress is that is sought by the population as a whole.

Campbell guides the reader through all the important arguments and debates around free will. These include concepts of monism and pluralism in our definitions of free will, the differences between various believed sources of free will, fatalism, and how the notions of time and truth, and even God and metaphysics, interplay with free will. He uses examples and literature engagingly, such as an excerpt of Somerset Maugham's play "Sheppy", and a case study of why someone would evade taxes to help illustrate his main points, and provide invaluable refreshers and relief from the main text. More of these would have been welcome.

Central to the book is the question is free will compatible with the thesis of determinism, in one definition stated as "given the past and the laws of nature, there is only one possible future". Campbell argues that if free will is compatible with determinism then the best arguments for free will skepticism, which state the opposite, are unsound. This compatibilism is the thesis that the "very same act can be both free and fully determined." Campbell argues coherently that determinism is compatible with free will and that in contrast indeterminism "cannot entail that every act is undetermined let alone that every act is a matter of luck".

At the end of the book the free will theories of libertarianism, the conjunction of incompatibilism and the free will thesis, and naturalism, are explored, although not with as much depth as compatibilism.

Overall Campbell comes down very firmly for determinism, and he follows on to strongly support free will and an almost absolute moral responsibility. He finds this because he finds the arguments for incompatibilism too weak, in other words he supports compatibilism, and thus finds "there is no compelling reason to support either free will skepticism or skepticism about moral responsibility." After such a nuanced and deeply involved text this seems almost too simplistic a formula. Although it is common and perhaps necessary for philosophers to expound such black and white statements, in doing so it seems they lose some of their relevance to the real world.

This is quite an academic and dense text and may not be that approachable to those that are not engaged in philosophy already, but will undoubtedly be useful to those studying it. It may also be very interesting to people working in behavioural economics and public policy in order to understand some of the fundamental principles behind arguments around, and often against, the ability of such disciplines to fundamentally alter



behaviour. Enormous ground is covered in this quite slim volume and there is much to cogitate on: it is fascinating entrée in to this extremely relevant and contemporary area of philosophy.

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