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Free: Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will



Synopsis

Does free will exist? The question has fueled heated debates spanning from philosophy to psychology and religion. The answer has major implications, and the stakes are high. To put it in the simple terms that have come to dominate these debates, if we are free to make our own decisions, we are accountable for what we do, and if we aren't free, we're off the hook. There are neuroscientists who claim that our decisions are made unconsciously and are therefore outside of our control and social psychologists who argue that myriad imperceptible factors influence even our minor decisions to the extent that there is no room for free will. According to philosopher Alfred R. Mele, what they point to as hard and fast evidence that free will cannot exist actually leaves much room for doubt. If we look more closely at the major experiments that free will deniers cite, we can see large gaps where the light of possibility shines through. In *Free: Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will*, Mele lays out his opponents' experiments simply and clearly, and proceeds to debunk their supposed findings, one by one, explaining how the experiments don't provide the solid evidence for which they have been touted. There is powerful evidence that conscious decisions play an important role in our lives, and knowledge about situational influences can allow people to respond to those influences rationally rather than with blind obedience. Mele also explores the meaning and ramifications of free will. What, exactly, does it mean to have free will -- is it a state of our soul, or an undefinable openness to alternative decisions? Is it something natural and practical that is closely tied to moral responsibility? Since evidence suggests that denying the existence of free will actually encourages bad behavior, we have a duty to give it a fair chance.

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Customer Reviews

"...his book is a model of accessible philosophical argument." --New Statesman "Alfred Mele's beautifully written and easily accessible book is a perfect tonic to the many recent claims by scientists that there is no such thing as free will. Mele has written a book for everyone, including specialists in the sciences and in philosophy, as well as a much wider audience. Indeed, any thoughtful layperson will profit from reading this book, learning first why a range of scientific studies are taken to prove that no one has free will, and then why these studies actually fail to do so. Free is interdisciplinary inquiry at its finest. Mele truly shows how contemporary philosophy and the sciences can learn from one another, and why doing so is so very enriching." --Michael McKenna, University of Arizona "Mele provides a devastating critique of the typical grounds for skepticism about free will that arise from work in neuroscience and psychology. Even better, Mele's discussion is straightforward and accessible to non-specialists and specialists alike. It is the first thing anyone should read to get a sense of the state of play on the relevance of science to questions of free will." --Manuel Vargas, University of San Francisco "As director of the Big Questions on Free Will project and author of many books on the topic, Al Mele has been at the forefront of contemporary philosophers exploring the implications of recent research in neuroscience and psychology for philosophical debates about free will. In *Free*, he surveys the key results of these explorations in an accessible book that will engage students and non-specialists, while at the same time providing a useful overview of the issues for specialists as well. New research in neuroscience and psychology forces us to refine our thinking about free will. But Mele makes a strong case that this research does not undermine all modern views about it, and he does so in straightforward, understandable discussions of the research and its implications in this short, informative book." --Robert Kane, University of Texas at Austin

Alfred R. Mele is the William H. and Lucyle T. Werkmeister Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University. He is the author of eight previous Oxford books, including *Free Will and Luck* (2006), *Effective Intentions* (2009), *Backsliding* (2012), and *A Dialogue on Free Will and Science* (2013). He also is the editor or co-editor of five OUP books, including *The Philosophy of Action* (1997) and *Free Will and Consciousness: How Might They Work?* (2010).

Pretty short, mostly casual level exploration of the most prominent scientific challenges to free will. If

you want detailed rigorous philosophy, you would do well to look at Mele's other books. This one is by comparison an easy-to-read version of the topic, not that that is a bad thing. Still, the ideas are good and the points made clear and compelling. Highly recommended as an intro to the subject.

The so-called "science" against free will is on very shaky ground. Meek shows why in a very readable book. Well worth reading for its insights

Excellent seller and book!

Mele has written an extremely accessible introduction to and critique of the hallmark experiments that are bandied about in the popular press as 'evidence' against free will. He convincingly shows that the experiments, though interesting in themselves, suffer from several difficulties when pressed into service as evidence against free will. There are some broad generalisations bordering on fallacies in the book, most notably in the section discussing the behavioural experiments. That, in the prison experiments, some guards did not behave inhumanely does not show that we have free will - I don't think anti free will proponents would claim that every human being in the same situation would do the same thing. But perhaps there are those who would make such ambitious claims? Mele also spends the final chapter hammering home (in a gentle way) the importance of clarifying definitions in discussions like these. It seems that many prominent anti free will proponents have in mind some sort of completely Cartesian immaterial basis for free will, and take any evidence for material influences on decision making as proof against free will. Apparently, most people don't associate such a view with the term 'free will', and what has been disproven by the experiments is only an extreme form of free will. Overall, an excellent layman's introduction to the issue. Accessible, and does not descend into the breathless histrionics that are characteristic of most "science" writing.

Non-fanatic analysis of prevailing beliefs and truths.

It is an awesome book for a near novice in Philosophy. I have to tread thoroughly but enjoy every minute as it is so enlightening.

The first half of this little book is fair. The last half, the author gets down to explaining his views much more clearly. A pretty good book...

This little book is a gem. Alfred Mele is a philosopher specializing in free will, who is well informed about the neurophysiological and psychological literature. In his academic writings over the last few years he has convincingly rebutted claims that neurophysiology (Libet etc.) or psychology (Wegner etc.) refute free will or the reality of conscious agency. In the present short book he makes his expertise available to the general reader. He doesn't deal with all aspects of the free will debate, but focuses on the challenges that come from neurophysiology and psychology. He is suitably cautious, not claiming to prove that we have free will, but refuting convincingly the science-based arguments of those who claim that we don't. Unlike Mele's academic writings, the present book is very readable and is in fact one of the most accessible books on free will available. I strongly recommend it.

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