

**What Could've Been**

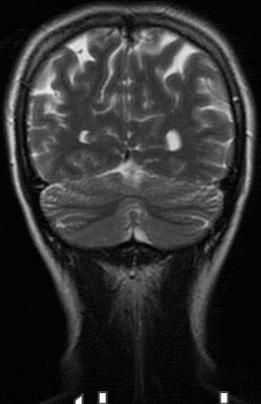
# Utilitarianism



# Cultural Relativism



# Kantianism



# Ethical Egoism



# Virtue Theory



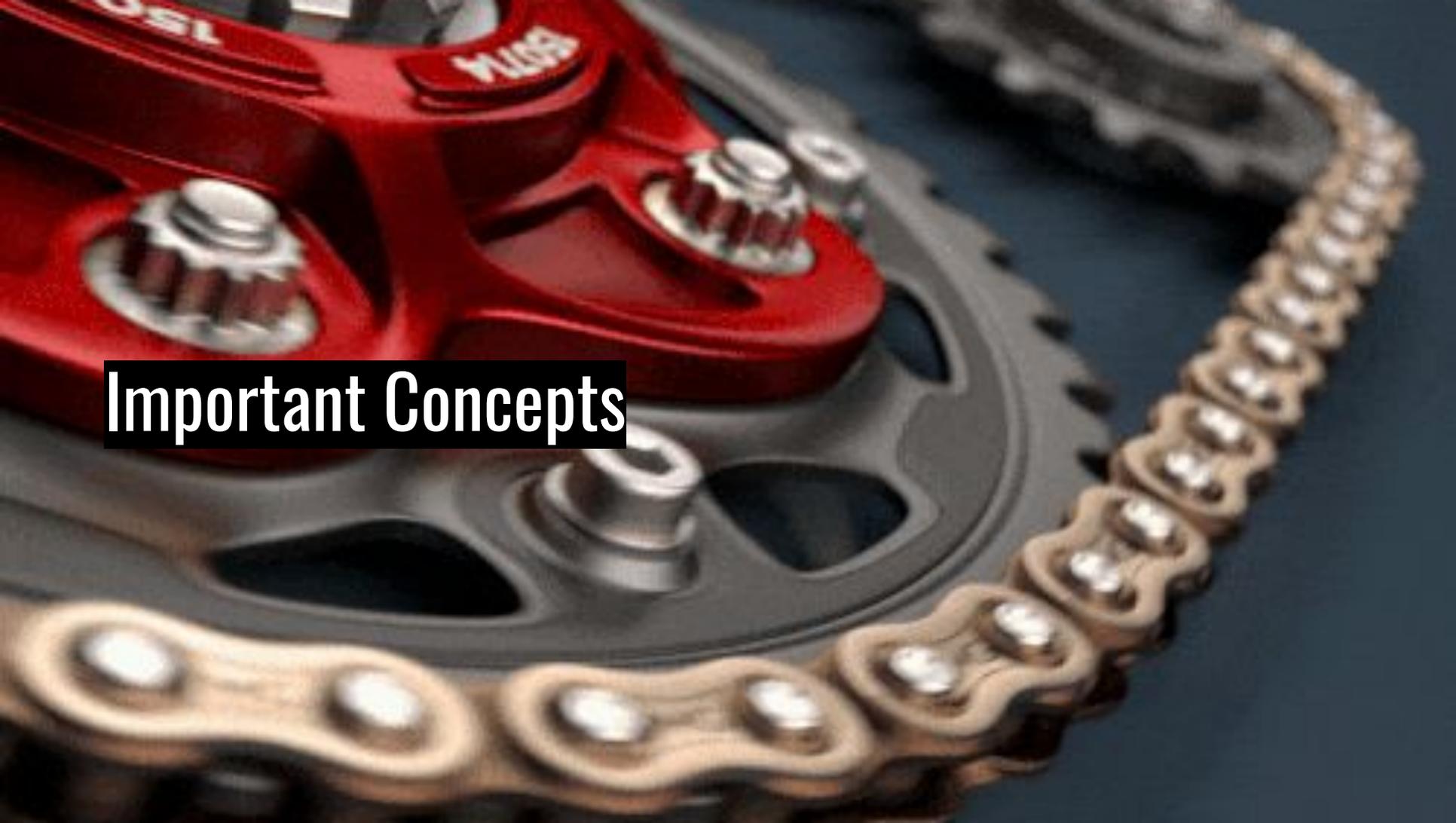
# Divine Command Theory



# Social Contract Theory

# **What we want from an ethical theory:**

- ❑ Fit in with our moral intuitions**
- ❑ Reflect how we actually form our moral judgments**
- ❑ Resolve our moral debates**
- ❑ Solve the puzzle of human collective action**

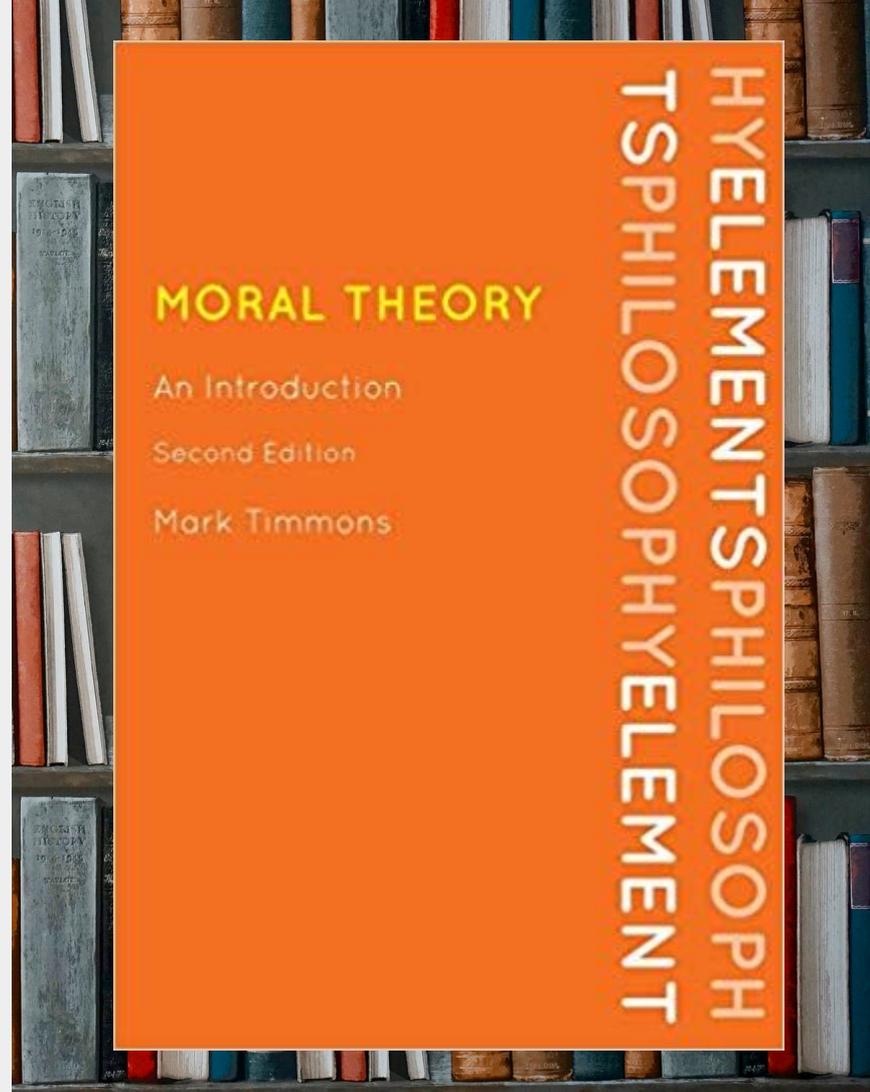


**Important Concepts**

# The Virtues of Moral Theories

Timmons (2013, chapter 1, section 7) gives criteria for assessing moral theories:

- **Consistency:** theories should give the same moral value in similar contexts
- **Determinacy:** theories should yield a definite moral verdict
- **Applicability:** theories should tend to be usable under normal conditions and available data



Theories should also have explanatory power and intuitive appeal (see Unit I, Lesson I), as well as external support.

External support comes from non-moral theories and fields of study.

## MORAL THEORY

An Introduction

Second Edition

Mark Timmons

HYELEMEN  
TSPHILOSOPH  
YELEMEN  
TSPHILOSOPH  
YELEMEN

# **What we want from an ethical theory:**

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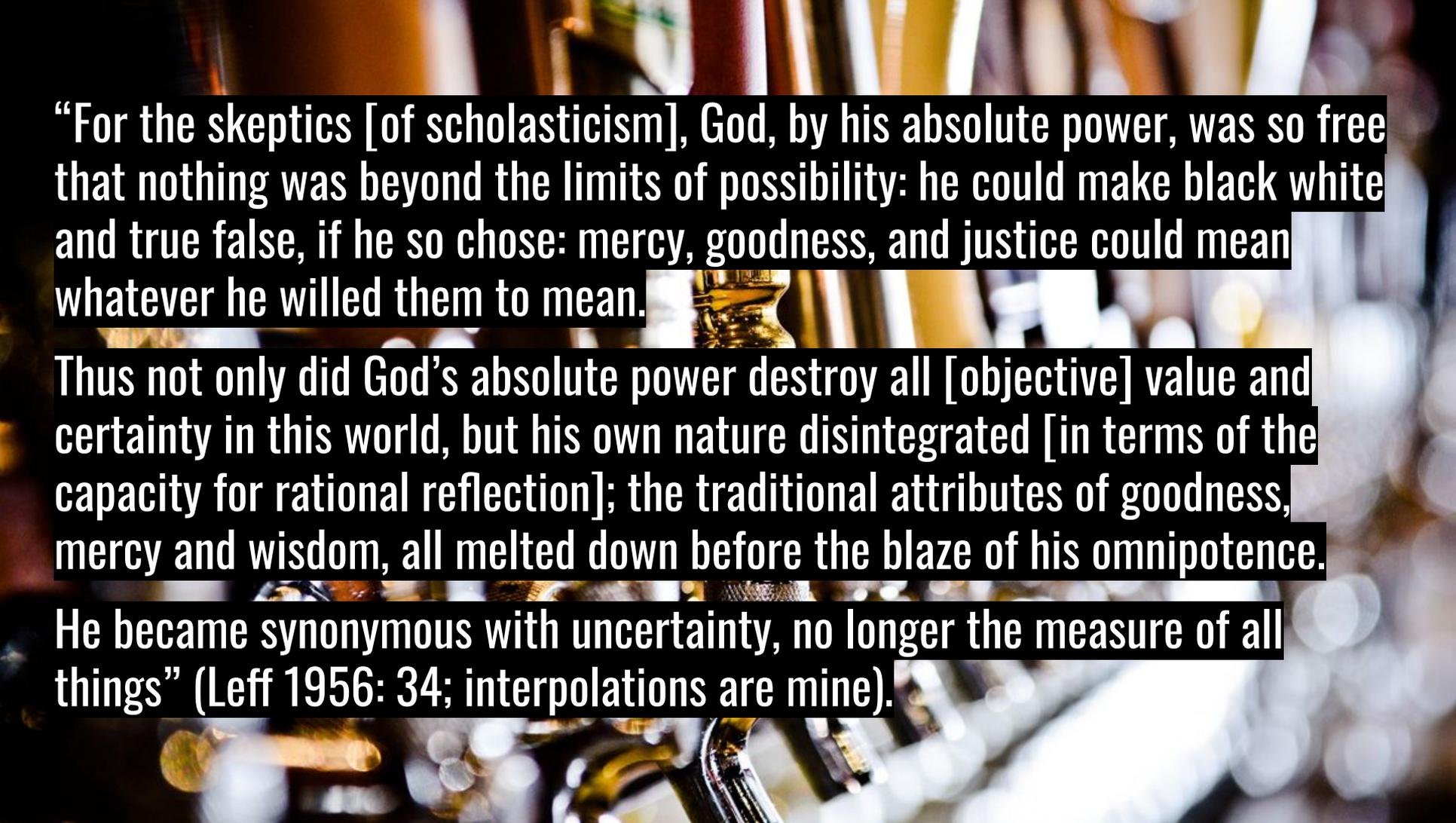
# What we want from an ethical theory:

- ❑ Consistency
- ❑ Determinacy
- ❑ Applicability
- ❑ Intuitive appeal (to fit in with our moral intuitions)
- ❑ Explanatory power (to as to resolve our moral debates)
- ❑ External support from the mind sciences (to reflect how we actually form moral judgments)
- ❑ External support from the social sciences (to solve the puzzle of collective action)



## What we want from an ethical theory:

- Consistency ?
- Determinacy ?
- Applicability ?
- Intuitive appeal ?
- Explanatory power
- External support (mind sciences)
- External support (social sciences)



**“For the skeptics [of scholasticism], God, by his absolute power, was so free that nothing was beyond the limits of possibility: he could make black white and true false, if he so chose: mercy, goodness, and justice could mean whatever he willed them to mean.**

**Thus not only did God’s absolute power destroy all [objective] value and certainty in this world, but his own nature disintegrated [in terms of the capacity for rational reflection]; the traditional attributes of goodness, mercy and wisdom, all melted down before the blaze of his omnipotence.**

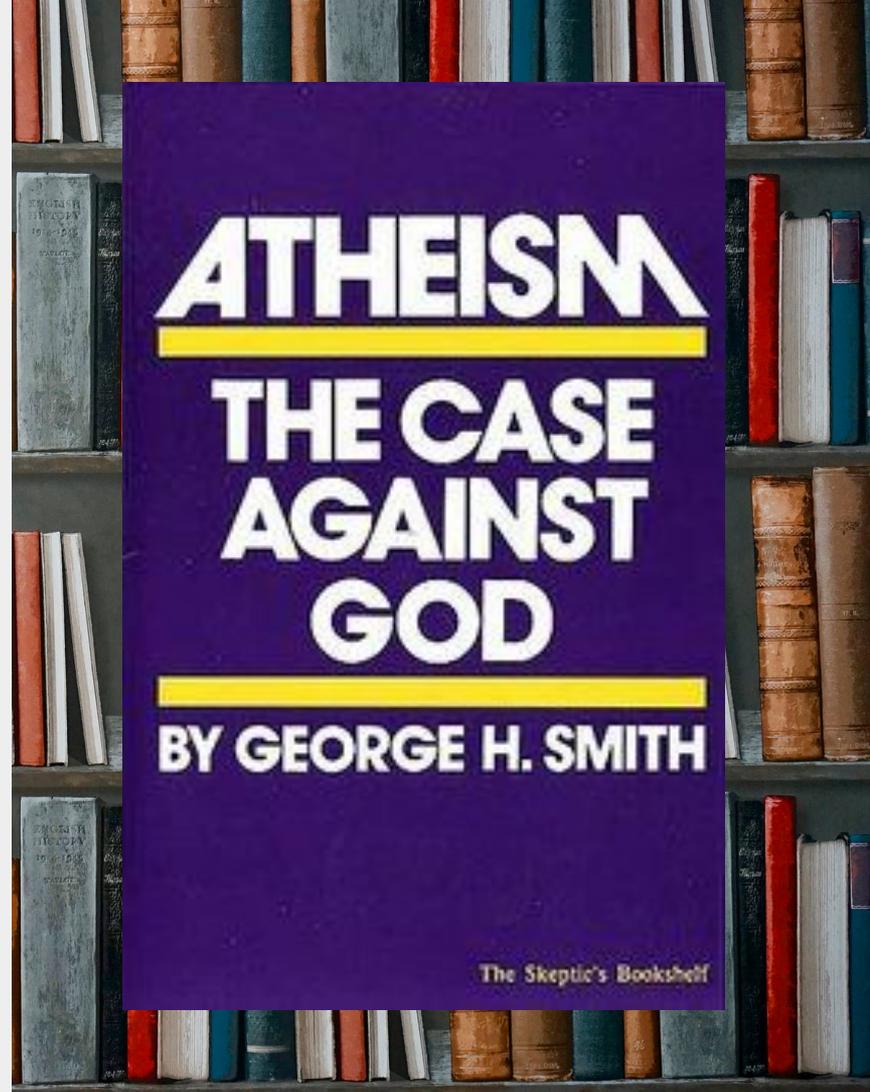
**He became synonymous with uncertainty, no longer the measure of all things” (Leff 1956: 34; interpolations are mine).**

Although Ockham was a believer, today atheists use Ockham's Razor more decisively. Here is one such argument:

A supernatural being is, by definition, a being which cannot be accurately explained by natural causes. I.e, it defies any possible explanation.

To posit the supernatural as an explanation for some natural phenomenon explains nothing.

The only tenable explanations would have to be purely natural explanations, not supernatural (see Smith 1989, especially chapter 8).





## What we want from an ethical theory:

- Consistency ?
- Determinacy ?
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- External support (mind sciences) ?
- External support (social sciences)

Religious priming decreases the likelihood of one cheating ([Mazar et al. 2008](#)), even if the primes are subliminal ([Randolph-Seng and Nielsen 2007](#)).

It also increases generosity and cooperation ([Shariff and Norenzayan 2007](#), [Ahmed and Salas 2009](#)), as well as increases the likelihood of costly punishment to noncooperators ([McKay et al. 2011](#)).





## What we want from an ethical theory:

- Consistency ?
- Determinacy ?
- Applicability ?
- Intuitive appeal ?
- Explanatory power
- External support (mind sciences) ?
- External support (social sciences)

**Another aspect to consider is the ontologies of a theory and whether they might render the view self-defeating...**

**For example...**

It is a widely held view that free will is required for moral responsibility.

After all, if one could not have done other than as they did, then it seems inappropriate to hold them morally responsible for that action.

**Recall...**

**Psychological egoism** is the view that all actions are done out of self-interest.

**Hedonism** is the view that the only intrinsic good is pleasure.

Together, these form **psychological hedonism**, the view that pleasure (and the diminution of pain) is the only aim of human activity.

However, if all of our actions are done out of self-interest, then we are not free to do otherwise, i.e., to act selflessly.





**Similarly, if all of our actions are done in the pursuit of pleasure, then again we are unfree to do otherwise.**



Social contract theory is compatible with both psychological egoism and psychological hedonism.

As such, it may be **incompatible** with the notion of moral responsibility.

Does this refute the theory?

**Ethical egoism is compatible with both psychological egoism and psychological hedonism as well.**

**It merely affirms them by stating that since those are the only aims you can have, those are the only aims you *should* have.**

**Hence this view might also be incompatible with the notion of moral responsibility.**



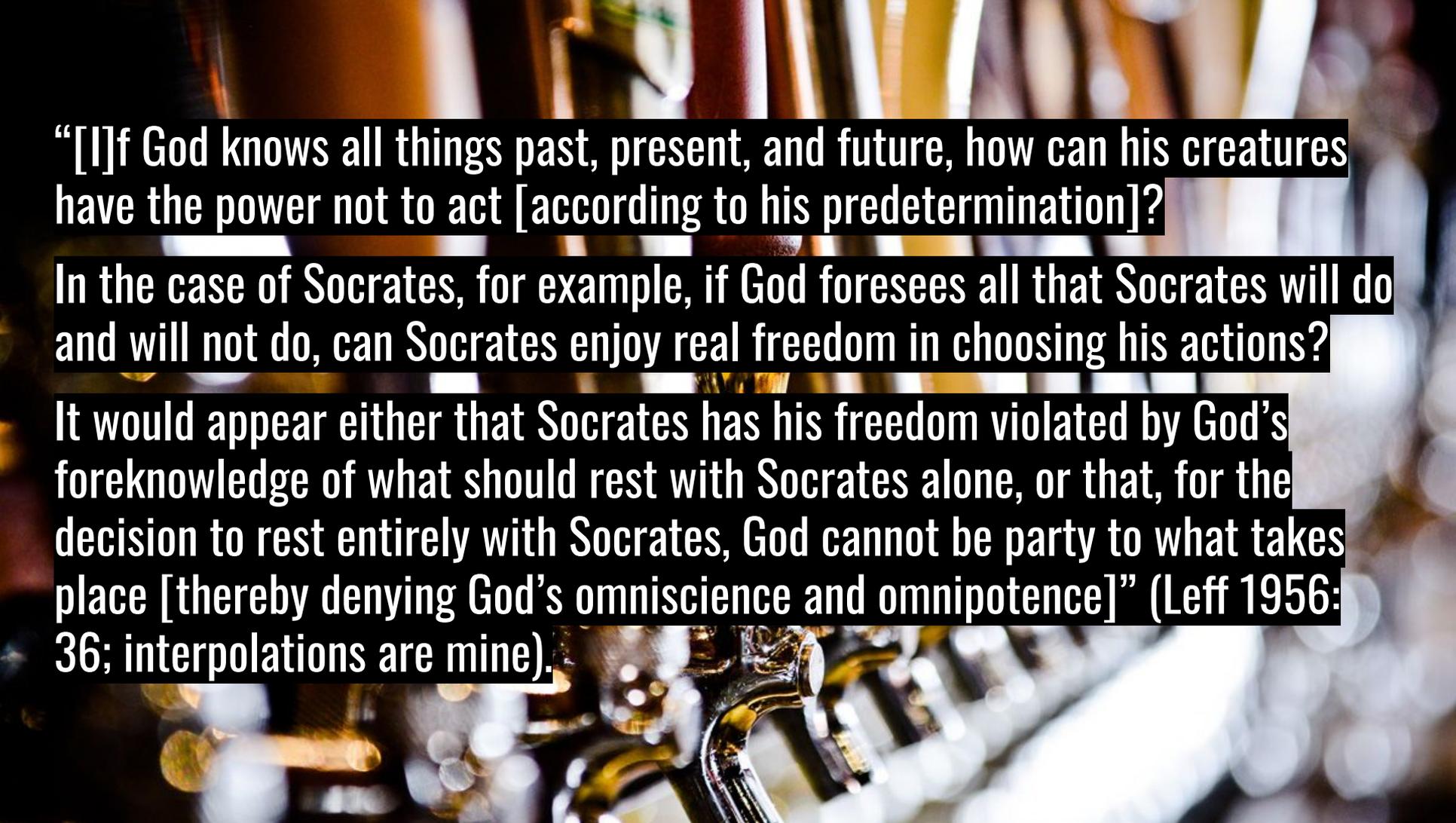


**Even DCT has issues with moral responsibility.**

**This is because some find God's omniscience incompatible with human free will.**

**If God knows everything, then that includes your choices.**

**Hence, your choices are predestined and not free.**



**“[I]f God knows all things past, present, and future, how can his creatures have the power not to act [according to his predetermination]?”**

**In the case of Socrates, for example, if God foresees all that Socrates will do and will not do, can Socrates enjoy real freedom in choosing his actions?**

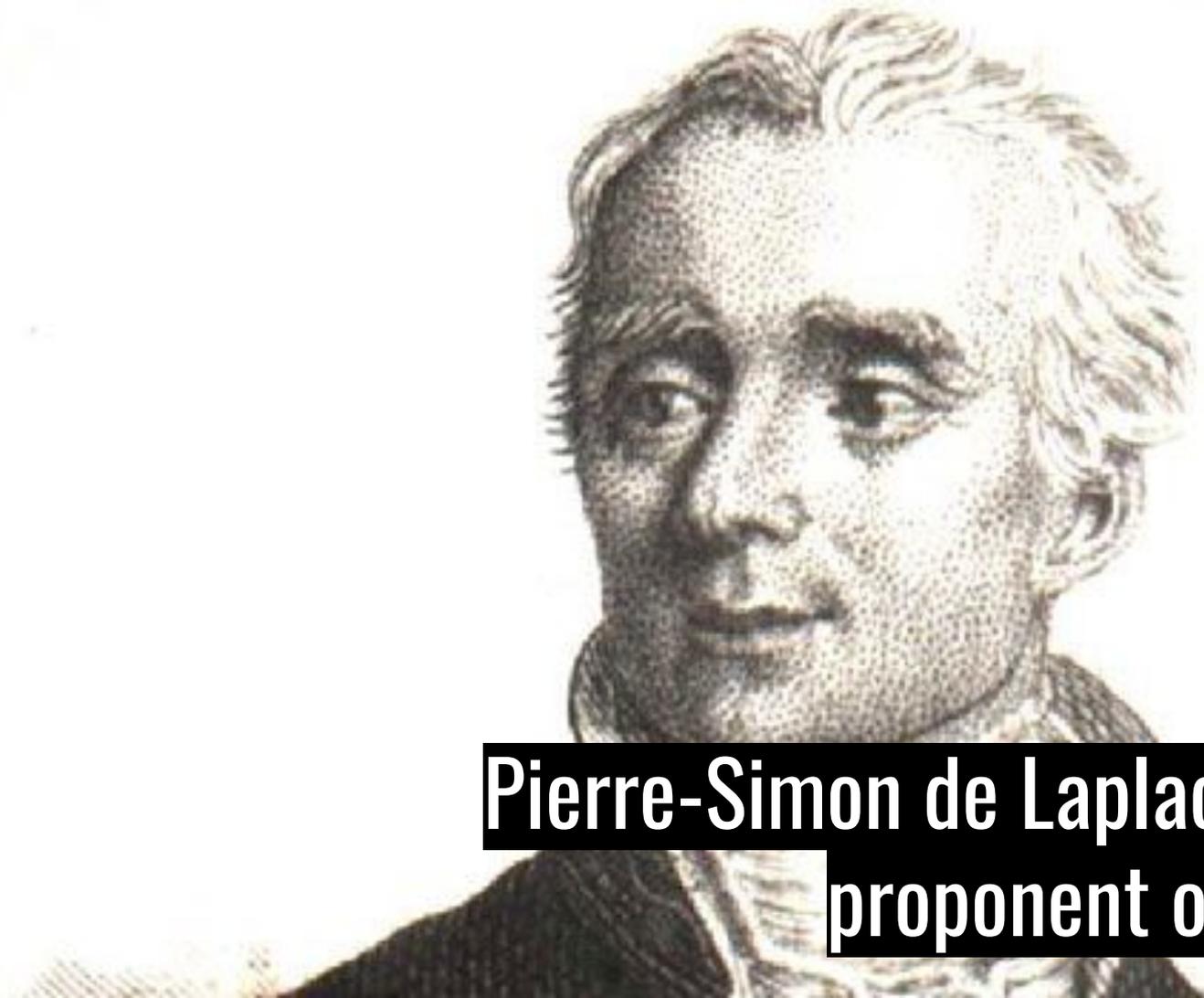
**It would appear either that Socrates has his freedom violated by God’s foreknowledge of what should rest with Socrates alone, or that, for the decision to rest entirely with Socrates, God cannot be party to what takes place [thereby denying God’s omniscience and omnipotence]” (Leff 1956: 36; interpolations are mine).**



Do we have free will?



**Napoleon Bonaparte, 1769-1821**

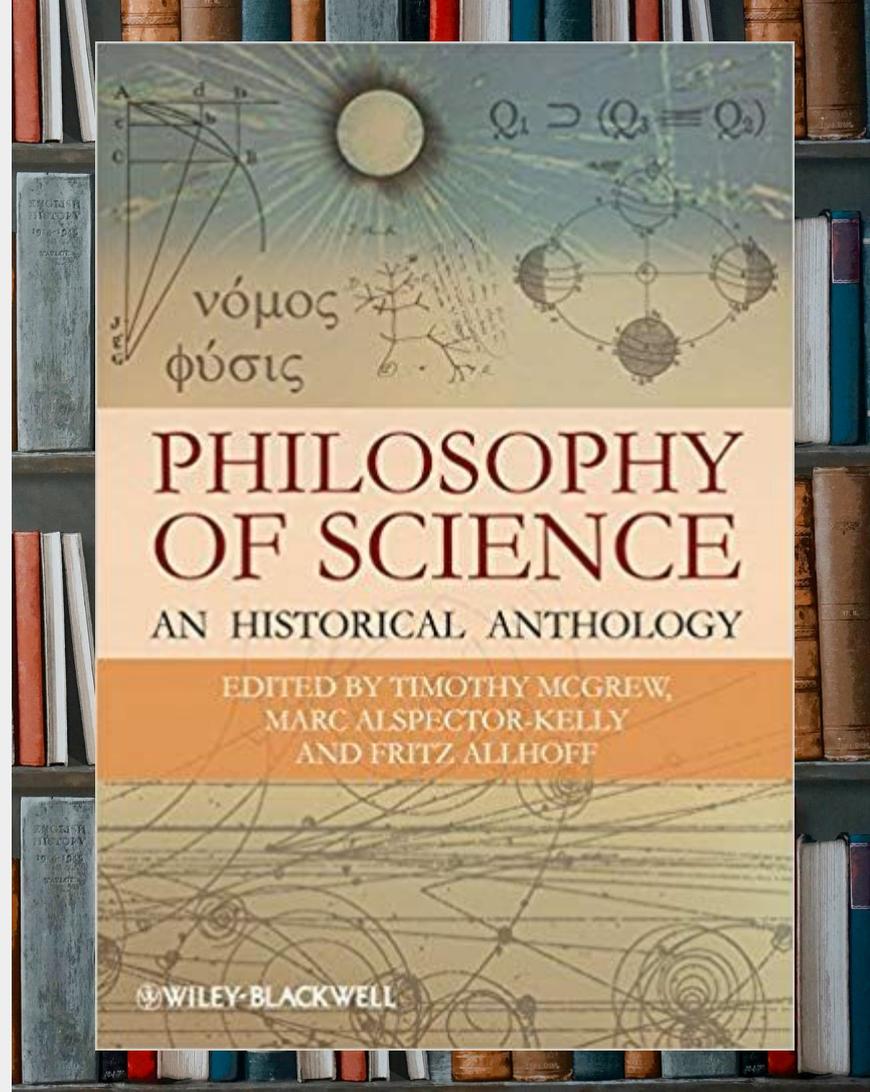


**Pierre-Simon de Laplace, 1749-1827,  
proponent of determinism**

“We ought then to consider the present state of the universe as the effect of its previous state and as the cause of that which is to follow.

An intelligence that, at a given instant, could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings that make it up, if moreover it were vast enough to submit these data to analysis, would encompass in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atoms.

For such an intelligence, nothing would be uncertain and the future, like the past, would be open to its eyes” (Laplace, writing in 1819 and quoted in McGrew et al. 2009: 251).



# The Classical Problem of Free Will

This problem is generated by three claims that, at first glance, seem to all be true:

1. Determinism is true.
2. Humans have free will.
3. Determinism and free will are incompatible.

# Three Solutions

Each of the traditional solutions to the PoFW entails denying one of the claims mentioned.

Here are the 3 solutions:

- A. Hard Determinism denies that humans have free will (claim #2).
- B. Compatibilism denies that free will and determinism are incompatible (claim #3).
- C. Libertarianism denies that determinism is true (claim #1).

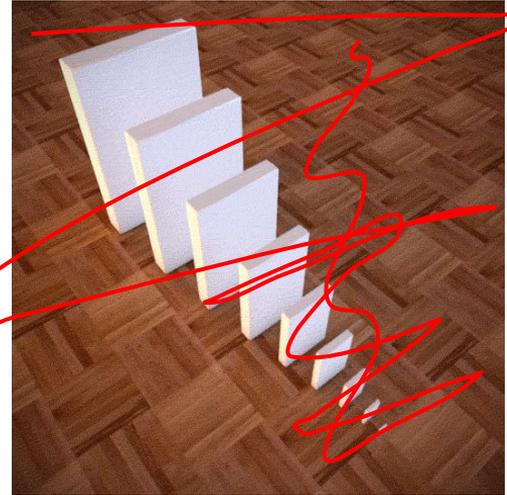
During this period, compatibilist and libertarian notions of free will were developed to fit in with moral responsibility...

## Some Libertarian thinkers, following Kant...

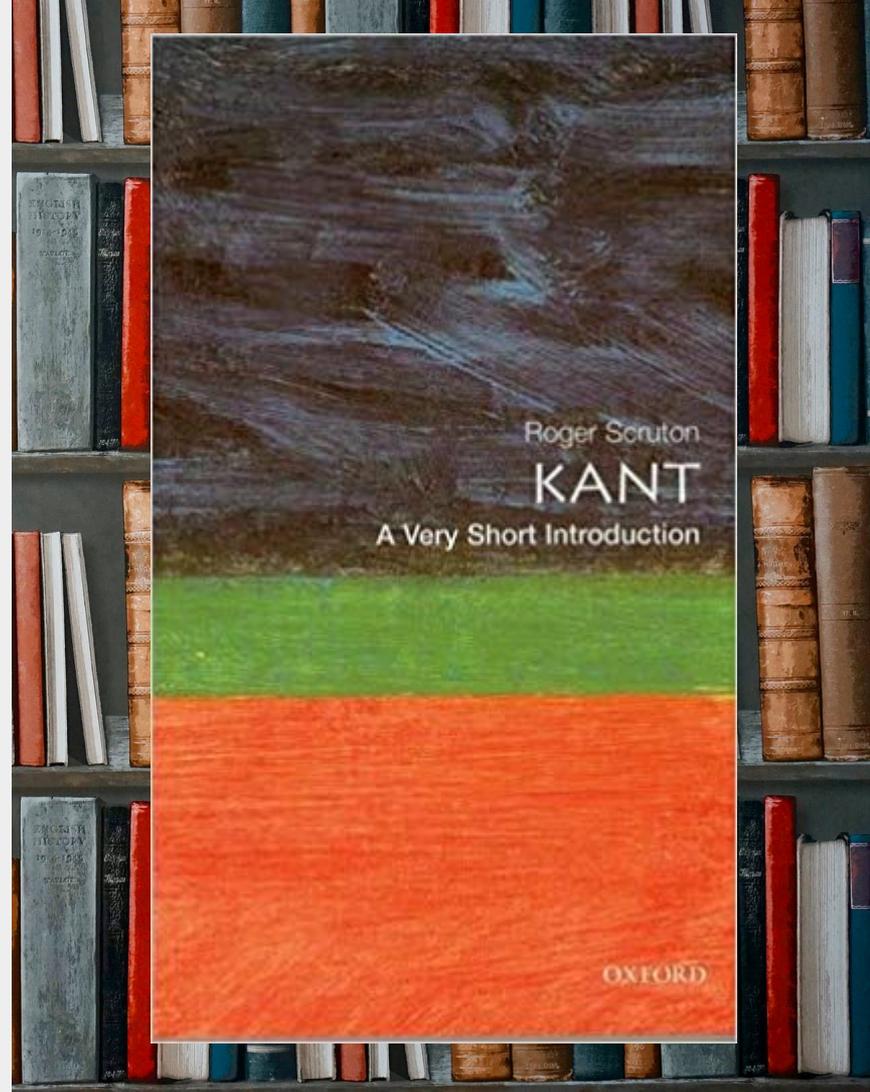
argue that only non-determined choices are compatible with moral responsibility.

For example, Robert Kane argues that an agent can be ultimately responsible for a decision if, leading up to her decision, there were some free actions by her that were not causally determined.

Kane calls such “regress-stopping” actions “self-forming actions” (see Clarke and Capes 2017, section 2.3).



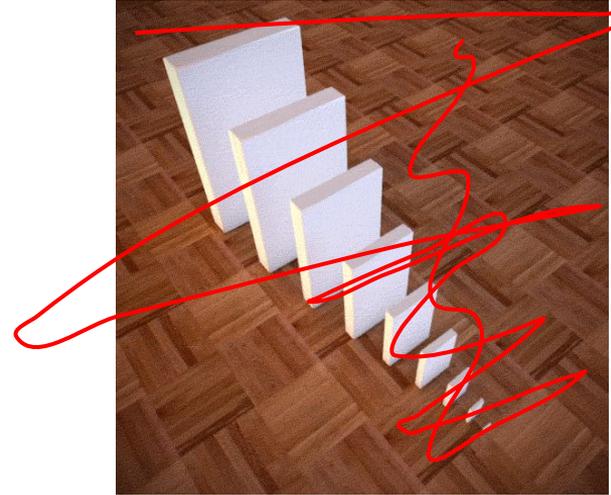
**“Freedom is the ability to be governed by reason” (Scruton 2001: 81).**

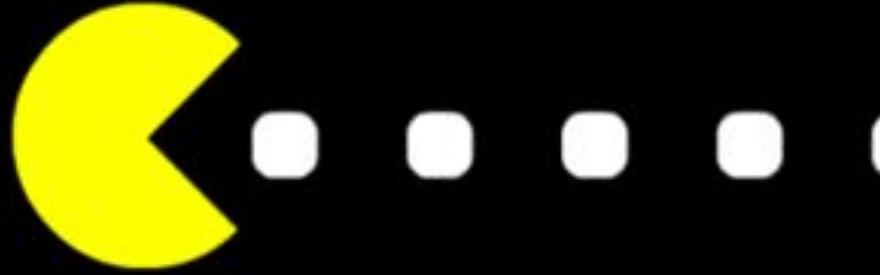


## Compatibilists...

argue that free will needs some kind of determinism in order to be coherent.

For example, Dan Dennett argues that “the practice of making oneself so that one **could not have done otherwise** is a key innovation in the evolutionary ascent through design space . . . to human free will” ([2003](#): 216, emphasis added; see also [Mele 2005](#)).



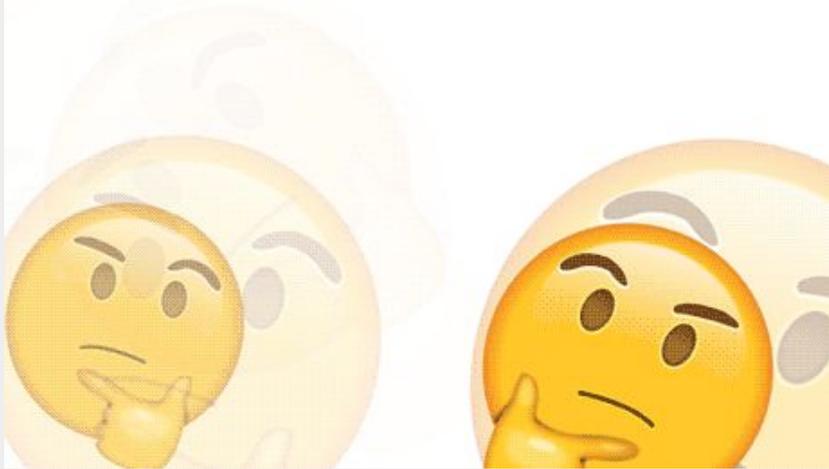


*Food for thought...*

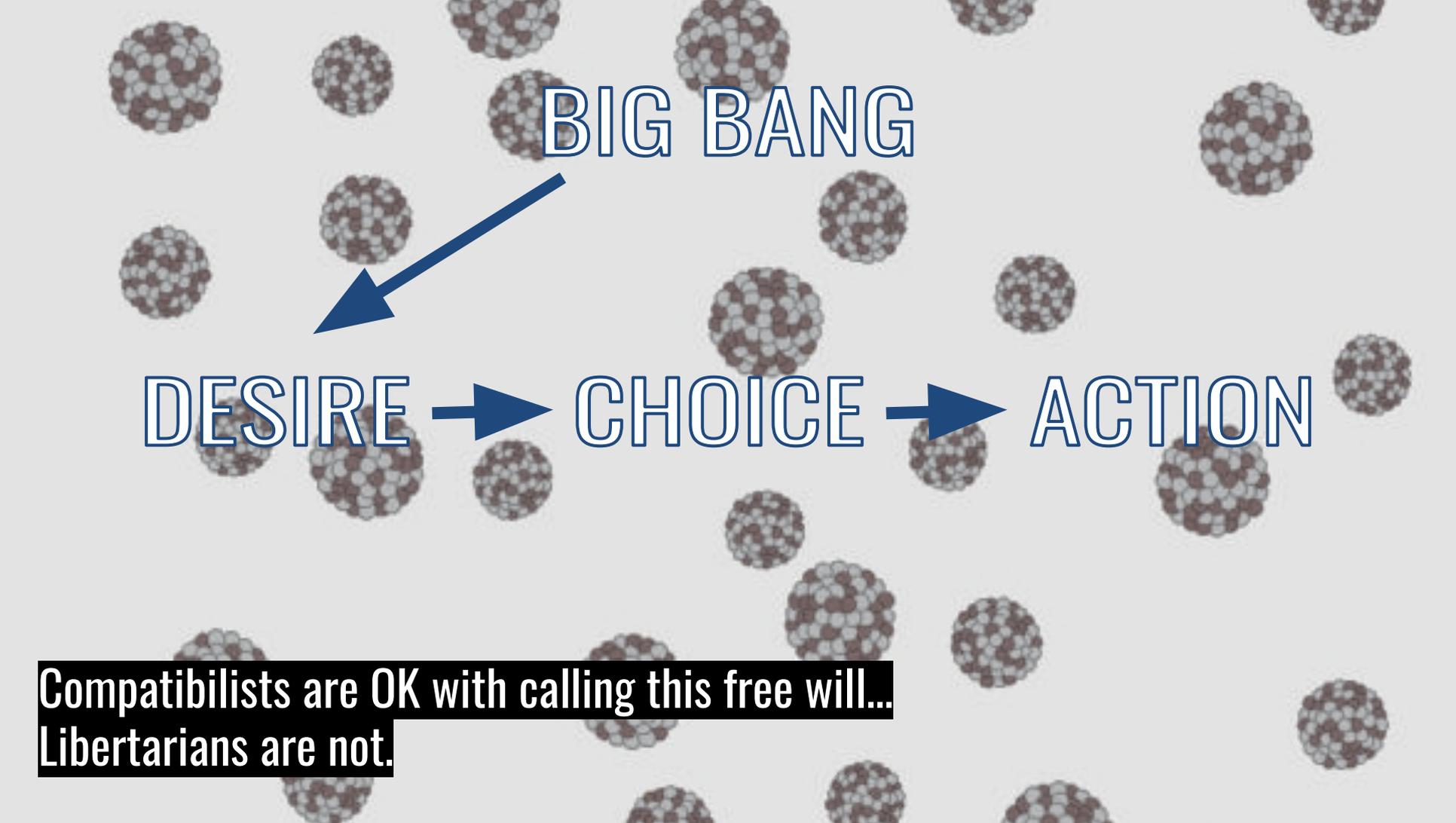
“Scientists have now made **remote control rats**. When animal welfare activists voiced concern, Professor Sanjiv Talwar of the State University of New York, one of the leading roborat researchers, dismissed the concerns, arguing that “the rats actually enjoy the experiments. ‘After all,’ explains Talwar, ‘the rats work for pleasure and when the electrodes stimulate the reward center in their brain, the rat feels nirvana.’”

To the best of our understanding, the rat doesn't feel that somebody else controls her, and she doesn't feel that she is being coerced to do something against her will. When Professor Talwar presses the remote control the rat *wants* to move to the left, which is why she moves to the left. When the professor presses another switch the rat *wants* to climb the ladder, which is why she climbs the ladder.

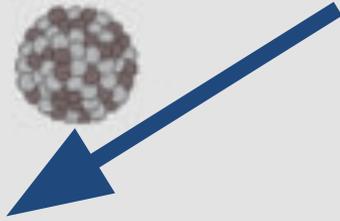
After all, the rat's desires are nothing but a pattern of firing neurons. What does it matter whether the neurons are firing because they are stimulated by other neurons or because they are stimulated by transplanted electrodes connected to Dr. Talwar's remote control. If you ask the rat about it, she might well have told you, ‘Sure I have free will. Look. I want to turn left and I turn left. I want to climb a ladder and I climb a ladder’” (Harari 2017: 288-9).



Still other thinkers argue that **this whole debate** is a merely verbal dispute, i.e., a pseudo-problem (see [Chalmers 2003](#)).

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BIG BANG



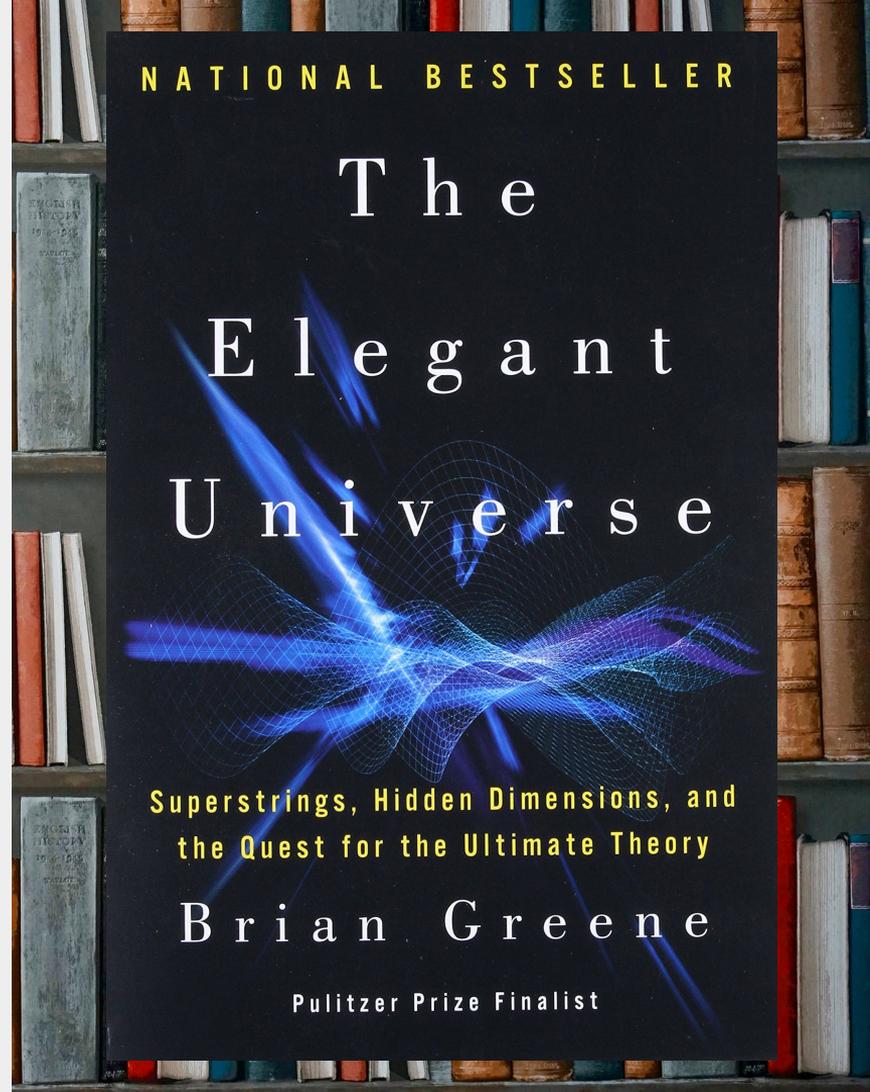
DESIRE → CHOICE → ACTION

**Compatibilists are OK with calling this free will...  
Libertarians are not.**

In any case, the status of determinism was called into question (or possibly refuted) by the advent of quantum mechanics.

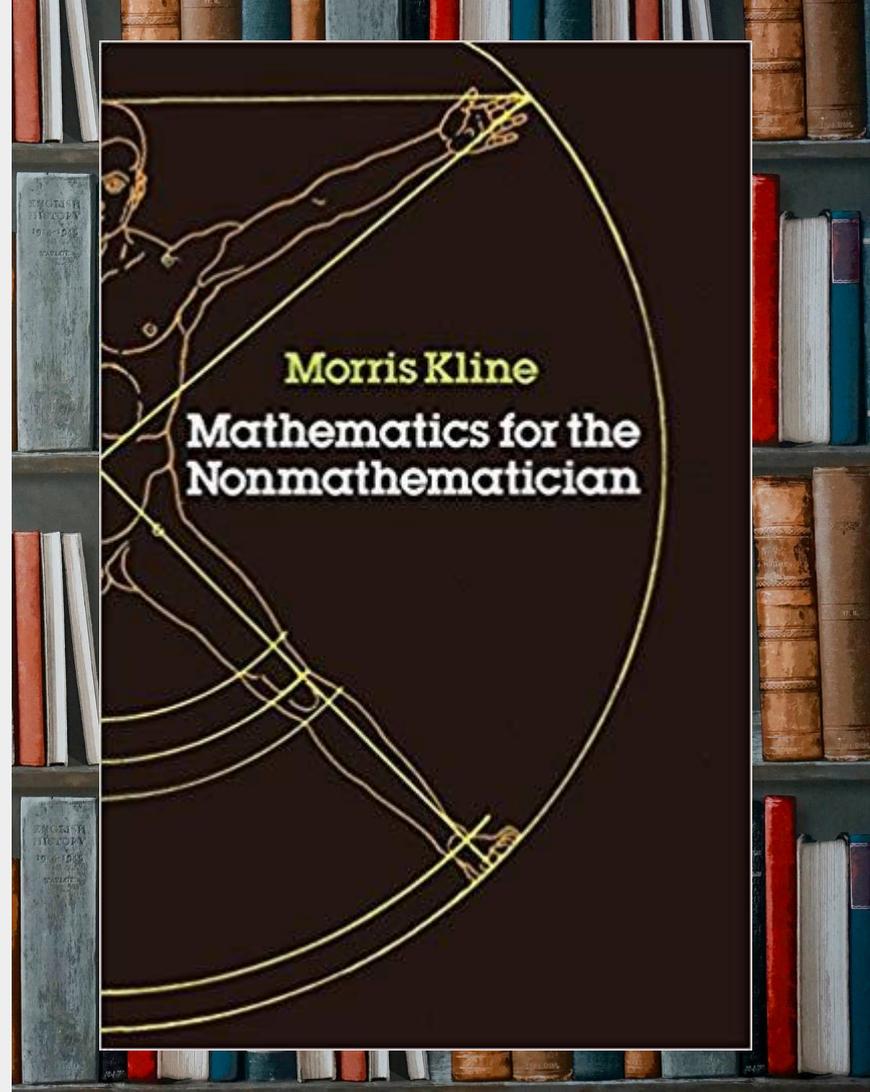
“We have seen that Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle undercuts Laplacian determinism because we fundamentally cannot know the precise positions and velocities of the constituents of the universe.

Instead, these classical properties are replaced by quantum wave functions, which tell us only the probability that any given particle is here or there, or that it has this or that velocity” (see Greene 2000, chapter 13; see also Holt 2019, chapter 18).

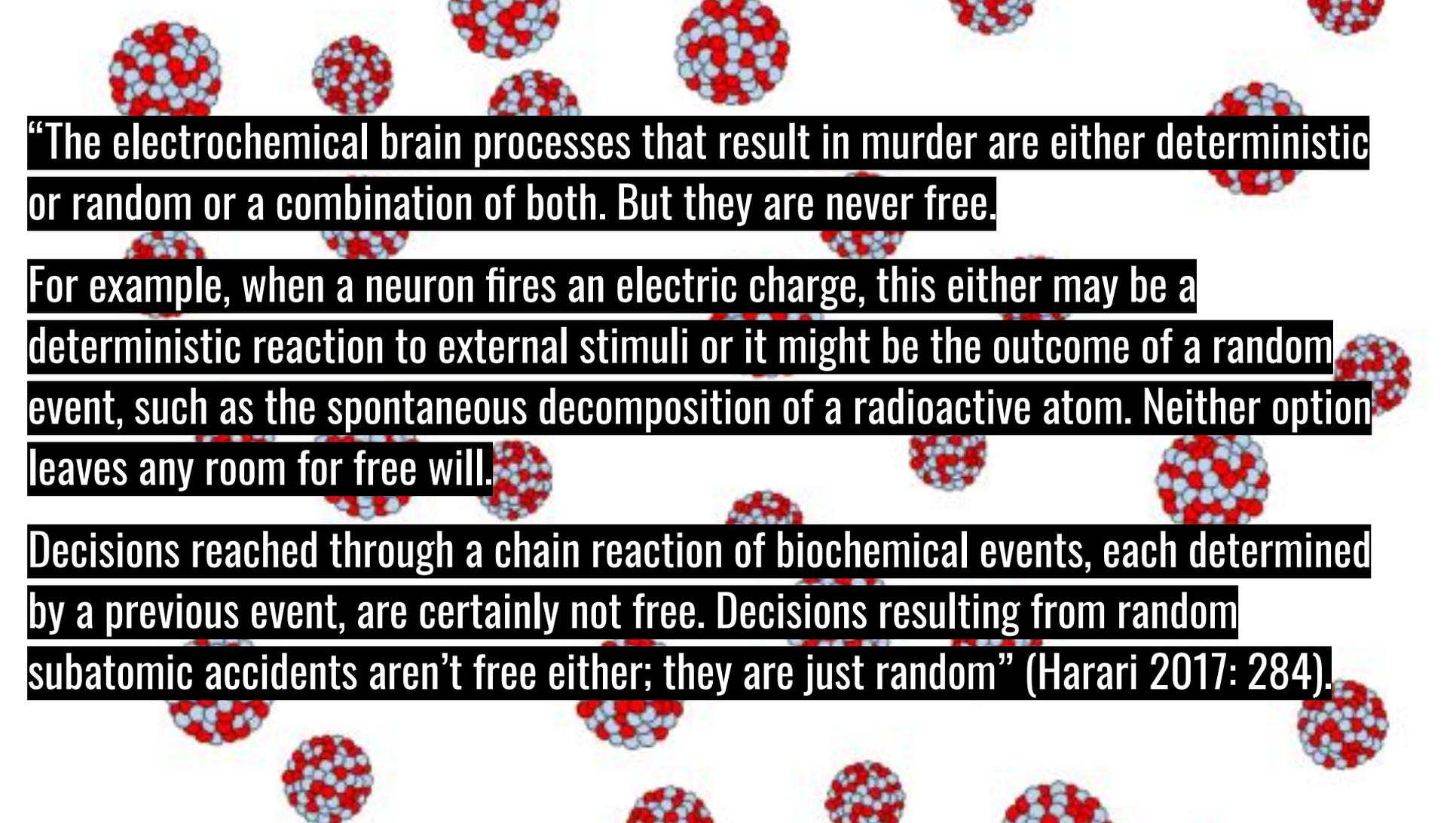


**“The most majestic development of the 17th and 18th centuries, Newtonian mechanics, fostered and supported the view that the world is designed and determined in accordance with mathematical laws...**

**But once non-Euclidean geometry destroyed the belief in mathematical truth and revealed that science offered merely theories about how nature might behave, the strongest reason for belief in determinism was shattered” (Kline 1967: 475).**



**But...**

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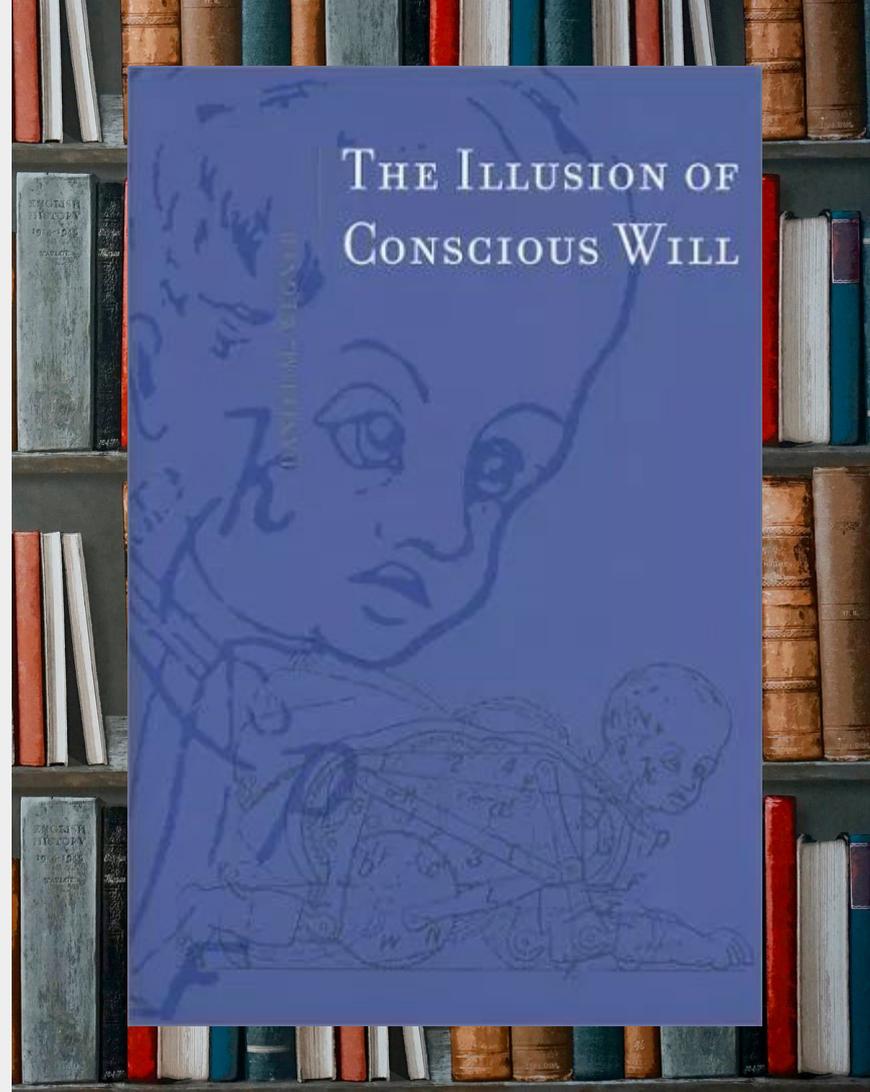
**“The electrochemical brain processes that result in murder are either deterministic or random or a combination of both. But they are never free.**

**For example, when a neuron fires an electric charge, this either may be a deterministic reaction to external stimuli or it might be the outcome of a random event, such as the spontaneous decomposition of a radioactive atom. Neither option leaves any room for free will.**

**Decisions reached through a chain reaction of biochemical events, each determined by a previous event, are certainly not free. Decisions resulting from random subatomic accidents aren't free either; they are just random” (Harari 2017: 284).**

**There's also skepticism about free will coming from the mind sciences...**

**For example, psychologist Daniel Wegner (2002) was convinced free will is an illusion...**



**If humans don't have free will, then moral responsibility may be an untenable notion that we will have to abandon...**

Neuroendocrinologist Robert Sapolsky (2017, ch. 16) argues that, since our traditional notion of moral responsibility has been severely undercut by recent data from the mind sciences, the criminal justice system must be completely overhauled and reformed.

# BEHAVE

THE BIOLOGY  
*of* HUMANS *at* OUR  
BEST *and* WORST



ROBERT M.  
SAPOLSKY



