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## ROBERT SAPOLSKY ON FREE WILL AND MORALITY

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**Abstract.** Robert Sapolsky is a distinguished professor of biology and neuroscience at Stanford University. The deterministic paradigm in biology reaches its peak through his books. The theory of Robert Sapolsky on free will and morality challenges traditional beliefs about human responsibility. Sapolsky argues that human behavior is the result of biological, environmental, and neurological factors that unfold over time, leaving little room for genuine free will. According to him, every action we take can be traced back to influences such as genetics, hormones, upbringing, and even moment-to-moment brain activity.

From this perspective, moral judgments based on the idea that individuals could have acted differently become questionable. If our decisions are shaped by factors beyond conscious control, then concepts like blame and punishment may need to be reconsidered. Sapolsky does not suggest that society should abandon rules or consequences, but rather that it should shift toward a more compassionate and scientifically informed system. For example, instead of focusing on retribution, justice systems could prioritize rehabilitation and prevention. Ultimately, Sapolsky's theory invites a rethinking of morality, emphasizing empathy over judgment. By understanding the complex causes behind behavior, society may become more humane, recognizing that individuals are not entirely the authors of their actions but products of intricate biological and environmental processes.

### • Introduction

The debate over free will and the foundations of morality is one of the oldest and most persistent problems in philosophy. In recent decades, this debate has been reshaped under the influence of advances in neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and behavioral psychology. One of the most vocal and influential proponents of a radically deterministic perspective is Robert Sapolsky, a neurobiologist and professor at Stanford University. In his works, especially in the book *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (2017) and in his recent public lectures, Sapolsky argues that free will is an illusion and that human behavior is the inevitable result of a complex network of biological and environmental factors.

Sapolsky adopts an impressively interdisciplinary approach, but he sometimes extrapolates excessively from empirical data. There is a difference between explaining behavior and eliminating normative concepts. Science can describe how we act, but it cannot, on its own, determine whether we are morally responsible. This shift from "is" to "there should be no responsibility" involves a philosophical leap that requires additional arguments, not just scientific data.

### • Material and method

The approach to the works of Robert Sapolsky can only be interdisciplinary, because he combines biology, neuroscience, and psychology with philosophical reflection on free will. From a philosophical perspective, he challenges the traditional idea of individual responsibility, arguing that human behavior is determined by biological and environmental factors. This view aligns with classical determinism, calling into question ethical notions such as guilt and merit. Thus, interdisciplinarity becomes a philosophical tool for rethinking human nature and justice.

### • Results and discussions

Sapolsky argues that every human action is the result of a causal chain that begins long before the moment of conscious decision. He analyzes human behavior across multiple temporal levels: from immediate neural activity to hormonal influences, childhood experiences, genetic structure, and even evolutionary pressures. In this view, there is no "free agent" making autonomous decisions; there are only biological processes unfolding according to the laws of nature.

One of the main criticisms of Sapolsky's position is that he conflates causal determinism with the nonexistence of freedom. The compatibilist tradition in philosophy—represented by thinkers such as David Hume and Daniel Dennett—argues that freedom does not require the absence of causality, but rather the capacity to act according to one's own desires and reasons. Sapolsky dismisses compatibilism as a trivial redefinition of freedom. However, this dismissal seems premature. Compatibilism provides a coherent framework in which moral responsibility can coexist with scientific determinism. The fact that our desires have causes does not imply that they do not belong to us or that they cannot ground responsibility.

Sapolsky argues that abandoning the idea of free will would have beneficial consequences for society. In particular, he claims that the criminal justice system would become more humane, focusing on rehabilitation and prevention rather than retributive punishment. If individuals are not truly responsible for their actions, then punishment as revenge becomes unjustified. This position has clear merits. The critique of excessively punitive systems and the emphasis on the social determinants of behavior are welcome. However, the complete elimination of responsibility raises serious concerns.

Sapolsky bases his arguments on neuroscience, but his interpretation of the data is often stronger than the evidence allows. For example, Libet-type experiments do not demonstrate that all decisions are determined before awareness; they concern simple actions, not complex decisions.

A more balanced approach would acknowledge the validity of neuroscientific discoveries without completely abandoning the concepts of freedom and responsibility. Critical compatibilism holds that, although we are influenced by causal factors, we possess the capacity for reflection and self-regulation that justifies attributing responsibility.

### • Conclusions

Robert Sapolsky offers a powerful challenge to traditional conceptions of free will and morality. His arguments are supported by a vast scientific foundation and have the merit of highlighting the causal complexity of human behavior. However, his conclusion that free will does not exist is debatable and, in some respects, excessive.

The critique presented in this article suggests that determinism does not necessarily imply the elimination of freedom, that moral responsibility can be conceived in a nuanced way, and that neuroscience cannot fully replace philosophical reflection. Rather than abandoning the concepts of free will and morality, it would be more productive to reinterpret them in light of new scientific discoveries.