

Free Will

Joseph Keim Campbell

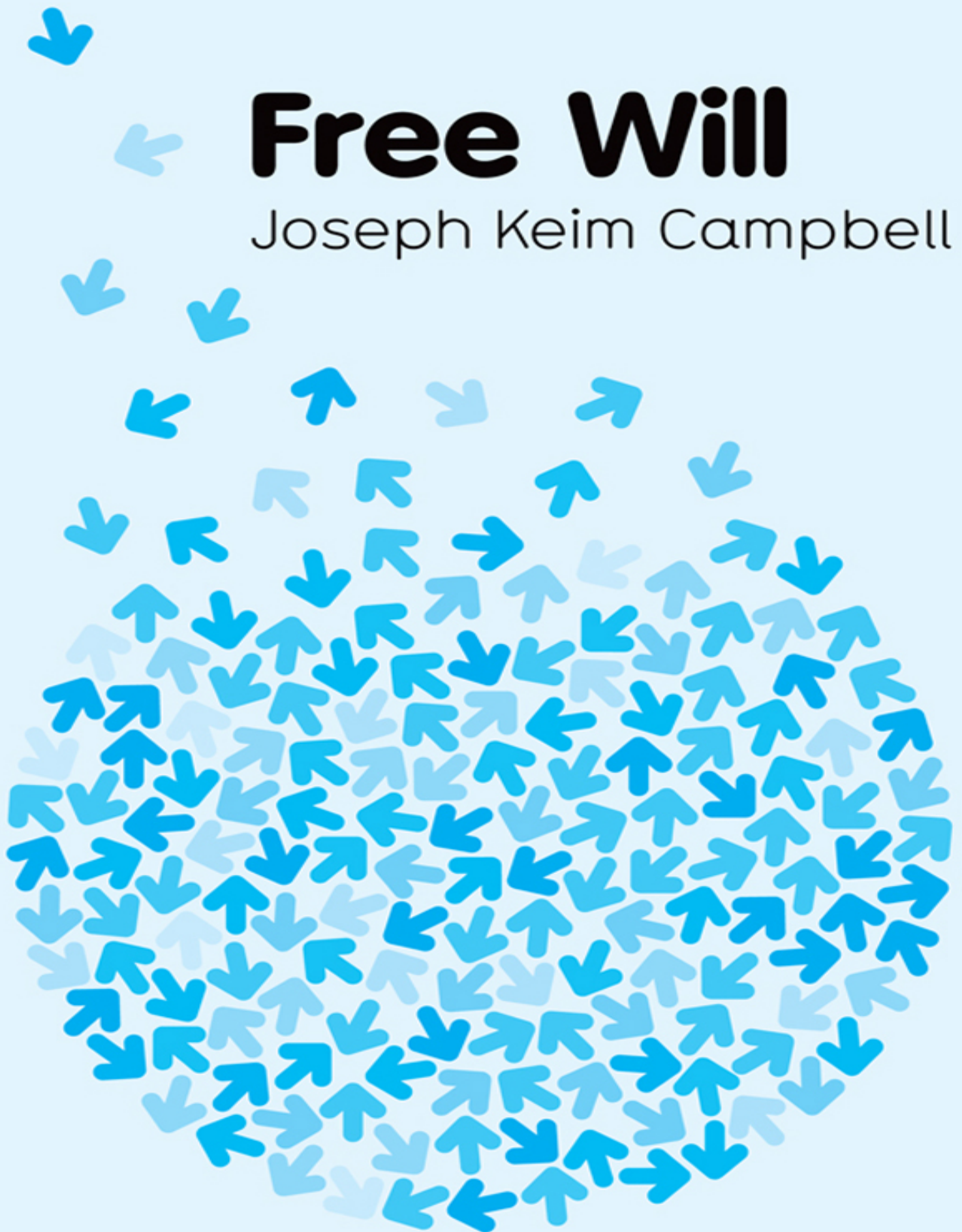


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For my mentor, Keith Lehrer, from whom I am still learning

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polity

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First published in 2011 by Polity Press

Polity Press

65 Bridge Street

Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press

350 Main Street

Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4666-4 (hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4667-1 (paperback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-3741-9 (Single-user ebook)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-3740-2 (Multi-user ebook)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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www.politybooks.com

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my editor, Emma Hutchinson, for the opportunity to write this book as well as for her guidance and enthusiasm throughout the process. Thanks to my colleagues, especially Michael O'Rourke, David Shier, Harry Silverstein, and Matthew Slater. Thanks to my students, especially Jason Turner. Several papers on these topics were presented at the Washington State University / University of Idaho Philosophy Colloquium series, and I thank my colleagues, graduate students, and other participants for helpful questions and comments. I've also benefited from members of the free will community, too many to mention, especially contributors to the *Flickers of Freedom* and *Garden of Forking Paths* blogs. In addition, I've profited greatly from the writings and kindness of Keith Lehrer, Peter van Inwagen, and John Martin Fischer.

Several reviewers from Polity Press gave helpful comments on my proposal. Scott Sehon, Kevin Timpe, and Manuel Vargas provided extensive, thoughtful comments on complete drafts of the book. I am indebted to each of them. Others who provided helpful comments on previous drafts are Nicole Brunson, Bob Kane, Keith Lehrer, Al Mele, Nathan Nichols, Roxanne Reese, Matthew Slater, Saul Smilansky, Kadri Vihvelin, and V. Alan White. Drafts of the first two chapters were used in several of my metaphysics classes at Washington State University. I thank all of my students, especially those who offered written comments on the first two chapters: Leslie Lambert, Juan Pena, Ross Powell, Ralph Reagan, Jaron Robinson, and Adam Sturdivant.

Last but not least, thanks to my family and friends, especially Delphine and Lake, for their love and support.

1

Free Will

This book considers various problems, arguments, and theories surrounding the concept of *free will*. We take the approach that *problems* about free will are best understood in terms of *arguments* for free will skepticism. **Free will skepticism** is the claim that no one has free will. It is the denial of **the free will thesis**: someone has free will. Given our approach, a philosophical problem is a genuine problem only if the underlying skeptical argument is cogent. It is rare that a single argument yields a result accepted by everyone. More often than not, there are various arguments lending different levels of support to related conclusions, together with a multitude of opinions about which arguments are cogent and which arguments are not. *Theories* try to make sense of it all, that is, they try to provide explanations in light of the overall evidence. We start with problems (Chs 1-2) that lead to arguments (Chs 3-4) and try to sort it out in the end by exploring a spectrum of theories about free will (Ch. 5).

My training is primarily in *epistemology*, the theory of knowledge. The central problem in that area of philosophy is the problem of *epistemological skepticism*. How do I know that I have a hand? How do I know that I'm not some handless brain-in-a-vat? As it turns out, these two skeptical problems - epistemological skepticism and free will skepticism - have more in common than one might think. A **skeptic** is one who has doubts but doubts come in degrees. The **epistemic skeptic** has doubts about *knowledge* and in this respect he is like the agnostic who has doubts about

God's existence. The atheist has doubts about God's existence, too, but they are more extreme than the doubts of the agnostic. The atheist is a **metaphysical skeptic**, one who denies the existence of something. Free will skepticism is a kind of metaphysical skepticism, doubt reaching the level of denial. My interest in free will is connected with my broader interest in epistemological skepticism and skepticism in general. The main question for me is: Is there a good reason to doubt the existence of free will, and to accept free will skepticism?

Much of this book is concerned with **the compatibility problem**: Is free will compatible with the thesis of determinism? In this chapter, we show that the best arguments for free will skepticism include as a premise the thesis of **incompatibilism**, the view that the free will thesis is incompatible with the thesis of determinism (§ 1.5). Thus, if the free will thesis is compatible with determinism, then the best arguments for free will skepticism are unsound. This doesn't prove that we have free will but it might show that there is no good reason to deny the free will thesis, which is not an insignificant result. Before that we investigate fatalism along with other threats to freedom from time, truth, and foreknowledge (§ 1.2-1.4). But why should we care about free will in the first place (§ 1.1)?

1.1 Why Care about Free Will?

Why care if free will skepticism is true? Why care whether anyone has free will? Why should we care about free will at all? We need to know a little about free will in order to get started. In this book, we adopt the reasonable view, defended in this chapter (§ 1.2) and the next (§ 2.4), that **free will** is the power of *up-to-usness* (Smilansky 2001). In other words, the free will thesis is true if and only if some of our actions are *up to us*. We say "actions" and not

“choices,” for we regard choices as kinds of actions. This assumption is controversial, and arguably false. Nonetheless, we adopt the methodological approach of understanding free will in terms of free action, for it makes the subsequent discussion a lot easier.¹ Still, why care if some of our acts are up to us? Why care if any of our actions are free?

Free actions are tied up with a lot of other things about which we care, like *creativity*, *origination*, *ownership*, and *authenticity*. Views of creativity vary (Russell 2008a). Consider Michelangelo’s statue: *David*. Is this a case of genuine *origination*? Was Michelangelo the *ultimate source* of the statue? Or was the statue preexistent, as it were, in the various fault lines of the marble slab, waiting for someone like Michelangelo to come along and expose it (cf. Leibniz 1704, 3)? Perhaps there can be human creativity without origination.

Some philosophers disagree and think that in order to be free, persons must be the **ultimate sources** of their actions, that is, the agent performs or even causes his free actions. Sometimes it is added that the actions have no prior causes or influences outside of the agent. These views are explored in more detail later (§§ 1.2, 3.4, 4.3, 5.1). It is undeniable that free action is required in order for us to be the ultimate sources of our actions. If no act is ever free and creativity requires origination in the sense of ultimate sourcehood, then creativity is impossible, too. Even if creativity does not require ultimate sourcehood, even if it is nothing more than the manipulation of something preexistent, it still requires free action. If *nothing* is ever up to us, then we cannot *manipulate* anything. Similar comments hold for claims about concepts like *ownership* and *authenticity* when they are applied to our actions. How can an action be *mine*, something I did, unless it was up to

me in the minimal sense to manipulate it, unless it was something about which I had some control?

Free will is also important because it is presumed by many of us to be necessary for moral responsibility. Whether free will is necessary for moral responsibility is a contentious question, in part, because there is no generally accepted definition of “free will.” Still, it is reasonable that if nothing is ever up to us, then no one is morally responsible for anything. Given our provisional understanding, it follows that free will is necessary for moral responsibility. Even those philosophers who deny that free will is necessary for moral responsibility believe that some kind of freedom is necessary. The connection between free action and moral responsibility is well grounded even though there are huge disagreements about the specifics. At the end of the next chapter, we argue that our provisional definition of “free will” allows for a compromise (§ 2.4).

One might also care about free will because one is curious. There are good reasons for believing that we have free will and equally good reasons for adopting free will skepticism. It is a puzzle to see which position is more reasonable and why. Still, free will is not just a curiosity. It is an exercise in self-understanding. For those of us in the West, free will is part of our concept of *the self*.² Whether you’re interested in the self or philosophical puzzles, or whether you think that moral responsibility matters, or creativity, origination, ownership, authenticity, or free action matter, you should think that free will matters. If you don’t think that any of it matters, probably you didn’t make it to this point of the book!

In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss our preliminary understanding of free will in more detail (§ 1.2). We also motivate free will skepticism with problems about fatalism, time, truth, and foreknowledge (§§ 1.2–1.5). We focus on the *problem of free will* (§ 1.5; Ch. 3), which

includes the compatibility problem. What is interesting about this problem is that it remains even if determinism is false! This presents the biggest challenge to free will. If we want to show that there is no compelling reason to adopt free will skepticism, this is the place to start.

1.2 Free Will and Fatalism

Two important views about freedom and control are *monism about free will* and *pluralism about freedom*.³ According to **monism**, all philosophers mean the same thing when they use the term “free will” (van Inwagen 2008). **Pluralists** note that the literature includes multiple and contrary varieties of freedom. Each variety of freedom is interesting and worth wanting, whether or not it counts as *the meaning* of “free will” (Balaguer 2010). For each freedom we may ask several questions. Does anyone have that kind of freedom? Is that kind of freedom required for moral responsibility? Is that kind of freedom compatible with determinism? In this book, we defend a monist view of free will but the debate is contentious and discussed throughout.

Given our preliminary understanding, free will is a *power* or *ability*, namely, the power of up-to-usness. Some philosophers believe that free will is a **set of powers**, like the powers of reflective self-control (Wallace 1994) or practical reasoning (Vihvelin 2004). Others think that free will is a single, **fundamental power** (van Inwagen 1983; Strawson 2002). According to the **classical view**, a person has free will only if he is able to do otherwise (van Inwagen 1983; Ginet 1990; Kane 1996). Most classical theorists identify the ability to do otherwise with free will (van Inwagen 1983), which entails that free will is a fundamental power.

Not everyone agrees that the ability to do otherwise is essential to free will. According to the **source view**, a

person has free will only if he is the source of some of his actions, whether or not he is or was able to do otherwise (Frankfurt 1969; Fischer 1994; Pereboom 2001). Views about the nature of sourcehood vary widely, from accounts that require that the agent is the *ultimate source* – “what we do is wholly and entirely up to us in some absolute, buck-stopping way” (Strawson 2002, 451) – to others that require only that the agent is the adequate source of his action. An agent is the **adequate source** if and only if he is the source of his action but he is not the ultimate source of his action (cf. Spinoza 1677; Nadler 2009). Free will might require sourcehood yet not ultimate sourcehood.

Our provisional view is that an agent has free will if and only if his acts are *up to* him. This appears to favor the source view but it is equally acceptable to the classical view, so far as we have defined these terms. Both theorists can agree that sourcehood is essential to free will, for sourcehood is just a kind of up-to-usness. The crux of their debate lies in the acceptance or rejection of the **classical thesis**: an act is up to an agent only if he is or was able to do otherwise. Proponents of the classical view accept the classical thesis while proponents of the source view reject it. Thus, philosophers like Robert Kane, who puts an important emphasis on sourcehood, come out as classical theorists on my taxonomy since they also believe that the ability to do otherwise is essential to free will. This debate is discussed in more detail later in this book (Chs 2 and 5). Nonetheless, what’s important is that discussions of free will are split between *classical theorists*, who think of it as the ability to do otherwise, and *source theorists*, who think of it as a kind of sourcehood.⁴

Free will skepticism is related to fatalism, though explaining the connection between the two is difficult. According to **fatalism**, “we are powerless to do anything other than what we actually do” (Rice 2010). We can

distinguish between **global fatalism**, where *everything* we do is fated, and nothing is avoidable (Markosian 2009), and **local fatalism**, where the fatalism is less restrictive. Usually, when we think of fatalism we think of local fatalism, not global fatalism. Consider this passage from W. Somerset Maugham's play "Sheppy."

Death: There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the market place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.

(Maugham 1931, 298-299)

In this example, the servant tries to escape by fleeing to Samarra only to find Death waiting there. The servant's death is unavoidable yet not everything is fixed.

For instance, that the servant dies is fated but presumably it is not fated when, where, and how the servant dies. He could have died in Samarra at some later time, or he could have died at the market. It is most natural to interpret Maugham's passage as a tale about local fatalism. It is fated that the servant die, but not when, where, or how. There might be a "garden of forking paths" leading up to the