

Philosophy in Review



Robert M. Sapolsky, 'Determined: A Science of Life without Free Will'

Ari Belenkiy 

Volume 44, numéro 4, novembre 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115580ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115580ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Belenkiy, A. (2024). Compte rendu de [Robert M. Sapolsky, 'Determined: A Science of Life without Free Will']. *Philosophy in Review*, 44(4), 32–34. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115580ar>

© Ari Belenkiy, 2024



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Robert M. Sapolsky. *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will.* Penguin Press 2023. 528 pp. \$48.00 USD (Hardcover 9780525560975); \$28.00 USD (Paperback 9780525560999).

Robert Sapolsky, zoologist by training who spent 30 years with baboons in Kenya and is now a professor of biology and neurology at Stanford, has (certainly of his own free will) decided to play philosopher. Within ten years of his Stanford lab closing, ostensibly due to the failure to produce a promised gene therapy against epilepsy, he summarily produced two densely printed texts.

First Sapolsky published *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (Penguin Press, 2017), where he tried to address the classical philosophical problem of free will. Not having a clear stance on the issue, Sapolsky's 'philosophical' method is to speak in parables, hiding behind a plethora of historical anecdotes. Each argument is followed by a contrary one; both ended with a 'smart' question rather than a conclusion. Sapolsky happily cites various paradoxes (e.g.: 'one cannot choose not to be a pedophile, but one can choose not to be a child molester' (597)), which, in his opinion, bring each definitive conclusion to its knees.

Why did Sapolsky embark on such an arduous undertaking? His eye was on the US criminal justice system. He dislikes it. His 'contribution' to the subject, of which he is ostensibly proud, was to cause havoc by suggesting the criminal justice system must be abolished ... if there is no free will! But what about free will? In *Behave*, Sapolsky chose to sit on the fence. He spoke about 'mitigated free will,' which is governed by a 'homunculus'—'a little man who sits in a secret chamber in the brain and regulates our actions' (588).

The 'homunculus' is a medieval construct, pure nonsense, while the actual solution has been on the table for about 200 years. In the 1840 *Prize Essay on the Freedom of Will* (Trans. E.F.J. Payne. Cambridge University Press, 1999), Arthur Schopenhauer denied both free will, the ability to act without any motive, and free choice, the ability to react on the same motive arbitrarily. Schopenhauer insisted that the problem with free will and free choice is the litmus test for a writer—is he a philosopher or chatterbox? Schopenhauer's assumption of the *stability* of the human character, the basis for his denial of free choice, remarkably was confirmed by modern genetics. Under the same motive and same circumstances, we always act the same.

Neuroscience, which took from philosophy the right to speak about free will, is an *impostor*. An object of worship by Sapolsky, Libet's 1983 experiment, which captured parts of a second between so-called 'readiness potential' and 'awareness of intent,' and lastly the actual motion, though remarkable in its ingenuity, is only marginally important to settle the problem of free will. Libet proved that the same trio of actors (motive, counter-motive, final decision) reveal themselves even in the most stressful circumstances when the decision is made within a split second. The major template for the free choice problem is a *premeditated rape*, where the molester has enough time to veto his decision.

So, is Sapolsky's paradox about a pedophile actually a paradox? No, but one must be a philosopher to unknot it. One cannot 'choose not to be a child molester.' Instead, one must build 'protective fences' to avoid arousing the urges, as Rabbi Akiba has taught in *Pirkei Avot* (*The Complete Artscroll Sidur, Pirkei Avot*. Mesorah Publications, 1984, 561), which teaching Sapolsky



could have learned in his Orthodox childhood did he not ‘break away from all religious belief whatsoever’ as the Wikipedia article about him says. If a person knows he is inclined to assault a child or a woman, he must switch to the other side of the street, not go out at all, or go and live in the desert. Avoid children or women altogether, if you are too weak to resist your urge to assault them.

But how does one know they need a fence here or there? The understanding comes only *after the fact*, meaning after the crime is committed. This brings us to the problem of punishing *first-time criminals*. Schopenhauer recognizes the problem: first-time offenders get lesser sentences, as before their crime they do not know what they are capable of. This must be taken into consideration, but it is not a reason to abolish the entire justice system as Sapolsky provocatively suggests.

Six years have passed and Sapolsky now has published a new text, *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will*. Historical anecdotes again constitute most of the book but there are several new twists. Sapolsky confides he has two goals in mind. The first goal is ‘to convince you [the reader] that there is no free will.’ (6). Oblivious of his earlier opus, Sapolsky appears to claim that he always was convinced that there is no free will. But what is free will for Sapolsky in 2023? It boils down to the following declaration: ‘Show me a neuron (or brain) whose generation of behavior is independent of the sum of its biological past, and for the purposes of this book, you have demonstrated free will’ (14).

Sapolsky has learned a thing or two in the six years following the publication of *Behave*. But to look for ‘a neuron’ to prove a clear philosophical doctrine—that every action has a cause—is the same as to line up baboons according to their height to prove the truth of the normal distribution! This is the borderline between a true philosopher and an armchair one.

And how does Sapolsky solve the free choice problem, which he refers to as ‘determinism’? No definition of ‘determinism’ is given, but instead Sapolsky proceeds with a lengthy parable (16-18) of two kids: one who is privileged and studies medicine and another who is underprivileged and empties garbage cans. Sapolsky suggests exchanging all their features (genes, background, environment) and seeing how they would end up—hinting they would reverse their status in society.

If you exchange everything, it is still the same two kids, just in reverse—they will clearly switch places! One wonders how these banalities can be considered as philosophy. Had Sapolsky suggested exchanging only some of the parameters (either genes or background or environment), then it could at least have been a *scientific* hypothesis. While likely wrong, it would have been at least *falsifiable* in Karl Popper’s sense.

Speaking of neuroscience, Sapolsky offers neither an experiment nor an argument of his own. Instead, he scratches the surface of several physics and mathematical fields: quantum mechanics, chaos theory, strange attractors, all in innocent belief that they can jointly prove determinism of human actions.

But, if the first of Sapolsky’s goals is fairly abstract, the second is more concrete and disturbing—a reform of the criminal justice system. Sapolsky proclaims: ‘Yet, if there is no free

will, there is no reform that can give retributive punishment even a whiff of moral good' (344).

Here is what Schopenhauer had to say in the last page of his *Prize Essay on the Freedom of Will*:

Those ... who hold that, just because of the non-existence of moral freedom and the consequent inevitability of all actions of a given human being, no criminal should be punished, start from the wrong view of punishment – that it is a punishment of crimes for their own sake, a repayment of evil with evil, on moral grounds.... Rather the law, i.e. the threat of punishment, has the aim of being the counter-motive to the crime that has not yet been committed. If it fails to be a deterrent in some cases, it still must be implemented, because otherwise it would fail to be a deterrent in all future cases.

The criminal justice system is not retributive but *preventative*. To grasp this profound statement is beyond Sapolsky. Instead, Sapolsky cites a scandalous [article](#) (*The Atlantic*, 2016) by Stephen Cave, saying: 'He [Cave] just might be right... And thus, perhaps, we're better off believing in it'.

The last portion of the book covers how epilepsy and schizophrenia were gradually understood by Western society as neurological diseases and consequently those afflicted are being punished rather mildly for their crimes. Sapolsky implies that all other crimes are also potentially 'biological' in nature and should not be punished, just in case. Or rather, provide the criminals in jail with extra comforts like the ones the Norwegians offered to the mass killer Andres Breivik.

Talking of fences, one cannot but recall another maxim of Rabbi Akiba, disregarded by Sapolsky: 'a protective fence for wisdom is silence.'

Ari Belenkiy, Independent Scholar