

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Freedom regained: The possibility of free will**, by Julian Baggini, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 240 pp., \$27.50 (hardback), ISBN: 022631989

In *Freedom Regained*, Julian Baggini draws on a broad spectrum of disciplines to defend the notion that, yes, we do have free will. Baggini targets recent claims from scientists who argue that (neuro)science has supposedly proven there is no such thing as free will. Such arguments depend on mistaken confluences of the self, which is taken as the nexus for free will, with, for example, the brain, the conscious mind, or the rational mind. Such amalgams are then taken to clash with a physically determined world. This opposition of freedom with determinism is the wrong way of framing the debate, according to Baggini. Instead, free will has to be understood as a plural concept, arising from a self which can endorse its own actions and which extends beyond the brain, the rational, and the conscious. These are the main ideas of *Freedom Regained*, which advocates a compatibilist and pluralistic concept of free will.

The book's nine chapters are distributed over five parts. Interestingly, the chapters are named for personas such as "The Addict" or "The Philosopher" and their contents thematically correspond to these titles. Motivations and a broader frame for the debate on free will are introduced in the first part. Throughout part two, the supposed dangers to free will from neuroscience and genetics are presented and argued against. Parts three and four showcase how freedom of will relates to issues of creativity, politics, mental disorder, and addiction. Finally, this plural approach to free will is used to conclude in part five that, first, the concept of free will is not monolithic but mosaic, depending on its (cultural) environment, and, second, that 10 myths about free will are dispelled.

In chapter 1, "The Demon," a brief history of the debate on free will is given in terms of the main "armchair philosophical arguments" (p. 9) which have hereto driven the debate. The reader is introduced to several reasons why free will is often taken to be opposed to a determined physical world, as exemplified by Laplace's titular example, and how philosophers and scientists have responded to this opposition. Baggini crops the supposed threat of determinism to free will down to the threat of *materialism* to free will. Materialism here should be understood as the thesis that everything that happens is the result of physical processes on matter. And because the movements of every material particle can be explained in terms of its interactions with other particles, there is no room for causes like beliefs and desires. The chapter concludes by stating that either looking for an immaterial locus of the self or striving to find causal gaps in our physical laws are the wrong strategies to save free will. Baggini argues that we have to understand free will instead from within a material world by expanding the scope of what we consider to be the "self."

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with recent scientific developments in neuroscience and genetics which are often taken to disprove free will. Baggini, however, argues that these scientific views target "only a straw-man version of free will" (p. 83). A common argument against free will in neuroscience and genetics runs as follows. First, it is assumed that in order for actions to be free, they should be caused by our conscious self. Second, it is shown that both our actions and thoughts are merely the result of underlying mechanisms in the brain or genes. Third, it is concluded that, therefore, we do not act freely. These chapters

refute this argument in two ways. On the one hand, the scientific validity of the second premise is undermined. For example, the Libet experiments are discussed in chapter two, along with their failings—though a mention of research on the efficacy of different types of intentions (see Slors, 2015) would have strengthened this refutation. Echoing Dennett (2004), the core claim by Baggini here is that we should not equate ourselves with our consciousness or conscious actions (pp. 42–43, 47). On the other hand, Baggini argues that the death knell for this argument is that it aims at an unrealistic “*absolute or pure freedom*” (p. 78), possibly inspired by religious, Christian traditions. Echoing Dennett (1984) again, we should strive for a free will that is “possible and worth having” (p. 81).

Throughout chapters 4 to 7, Baggini investigates what this free will worth having is by turning to a range of “experts” on free will. It is here where *Freedom Regained* shines, as Baggini interviews artists on their creative practices, political dissidents on living in oppressive societies, and psychopaths and addicts on battling internal and external forces. The intimate personal experiences of the interviewees nicely illustrate the pluralistic approach to free will advocated by Baggini. For example, in the chapter on artists, Baggini aims to show how artists might “provide a positive paradigm of freedom” (p. 87). Unconscious processes are presented as an essential component of creativity and the artist is encouraged to be “free from conscious, executive control” (p. 92). As works of art are seen as paradigmatic expressions of freedom, this practice runs counter to the neuroscientific view presented earlier, which claims that unconscious processes undermine freedom. Strangely, while Baggini earlier argued for a disentanglement of brain and self, he states that artists “should just accept that ‘they’ are their bodies and brains, and it is no affront to their dignity as artists that neuronal firing is the underlying process by which their ideas get born” (p. 93). His point would have been even stronger if he had presented creativity as essentially an act of an artist in constant interaction with her environment (e.g., Malafouris, 2008), in the vein of embodied, enactive approaches to mind (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991).

Baggini has also interviewed philosophers and personal conversations with a range of well-known thinkers form the backbone of chapter 8. Presented are exchanges with Harry Frankfurt (chapter 7), Daniel Dennett, Alfred Mele, Patricia Churchland, and Manuel Vargas. In conversation with these thinkers, Baggini develops the pluralistic view that free will is “more than one thing, or just ... [has] more than one form, each with different properties” (p. 183). Chapter 8 argues for three theses to support this view. First, he argues that free will is a “discretionary concept” (p. 186), meaning that while asserting that we have no free will in any sense is false, one could question the need for and usefulness of this concept. Baggini accepts that there is no ultimate argument, but that we have to “continue to argue that we do have free will” (p. 186). Second, he argues that the pluralistic nature of free will as presented here has an inherent “authentic vagueness” (p. 191) which analytic philosophers, who aim for a clear delineation of concepts, have to accept. Third, he argues that the idea of free will depends on a variety of concepts, some of which are culturally dependent. For example, individuals in a “shame culture” are less likely to hold themselves responsible for an undiscovered wrongful act than individuals in a “guilt culture” (p. 203).

The main conclusions of *Freedom Regained* are presented in chapter 9. These conclusions are twofold. First, a list of 10 common myths about free will that have been dispelled is presented. Second, we are given a general conclusion, which is that we should have a “realistic view of free will ... [that] steers a course between the hubris of believing we are unconditioned, completely free agents, and the fatalism of believing we are mere puppets of the laws of nature.” (p. 217).

Two general critiques on *Freedom Regained* present themselves. The interviews Baggini presents are rich and engaging—in chapter 6 he even describes personal conversations

with patients at a mental institution. However, while these interviews give a striking personal character to the topic at hand, they also shape Baggini's argument as a largely anecdotal one—see, for example, the way the addicts Peter and Fergus apply Frankfurt's theory of higher order desires to themselves (pp. 171–172). And while this show-don't-tell style of argumentation makes for a nice read, it drains the strength of the argument. On top of that, while important topics in the free will debate—on control, free societies, (legal) responsibility, and blameworthiness—are pointed out, almost all of this has been done before, and relatively recently. For example, the aforementioned visit to the mental institution challenges the traditional way in which we understand responsibility and “just desert,” echoing Watson's (1987) classic paper on the atrocious acts committed by Robert Harris. And the analysis in chapter 7 on addiction and taking control closely mirrors Frankfurt's (1971) analysis of free will, though he is at least referenced.

This raises the question of what *Freedom Regained* has to add to the existing literature on free will. Baggini, as I have pointed out, echoes plenty of familiar arguments and admits that every “piece of the puzzle I have assembled has been made by others before me” (p. 181). Instead he aims to “redraw the map” (p. 5) to showcase the contours of the debate on free will. Although *Freedom Regained* presents some interesting new perspectives, notably by interviewing a diverse cast of experts, ultimately the book fails to justify a recommendation of it over other introductions to the debate of free will, such as Dennett (2003). Therefore, while those uninitiated in the debate will appreciate *Freedom Regained* as an accessible introduction to the topic, academic researchers who look for new arguments for or against free will may safely ignore this book.

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