

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.

Keywords: Philosophy, Psihology, Biology, Neuroscience

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.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive critical analysis of Sapolsky's position on free will and its implications for morality. We will examine his main arguments, the scientific foundations of his determinism, as well as the ethical and social consequences of rejecting individual responsibility. At the same time, we will highlight the limitations and problematic aspects of this perspective, drawing on counterarguments from philosophy, neuroscience, and moral theory.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

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.

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.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Sapolsky’s Biological Determinism

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.

This perspective is supported by numerous empirical findings. Benjamin Libet’s experiments, for example, showed that brain activity preceding a decision occurs before the individual becomes consciously aware of the intention to act. Other studies have demonstrated that seemingly irrelevant factors—such as blood glucose levels or stress—can influence moral decisions.

However, the central issue is not whether these influences exist—this is almost indisputable—but whether they completely eliminate the possibility of freedom. Sapolsky takes an additional step: he concludes that because all causes are determined, freedom is impossible. This conclusion, however, is debatable.

The Confusion Between Determinism and the Absence of Freedom

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.

Moreover, Sapolsky's position risks becoming self-referentially problematic: if all beliefs are determined, then belief in determinism itself is merely the result of causal processes, not a privileged "true" rational conclusion.

The Moral Implications of Denying Free Will

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.

First, moral responsibility is not only a tool for punishment, but also one for recognizing human agency. To consider individuals entirely devoid of responsibility is to reduce them to mere objects of causality, which may undermine human dignity.

Second, social systems function based on the expectation of responsible behavior. If people internalize the idea that they have no control over their actions, motivation for moral self-regulation may decline.

Neuroscience and the Limits of Explanation

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.

Moreover, neural correlations do not equate to exhaustive explanations. The fact that a decision has a neural substrate does not mean that the psychological or rational level is irrelevant. Sapolsky's radical reductionism ignores emergent levels of organization, where concepts such as intention and deliberation retain their meaning.

The Problem of Gradual Responsibility

An alternative to Sapolsky's position is the idea of gradual responsibility. Instead of claiming that people are either completely free or completely determined, we can recognize that the capacity for control varies. Factors such as education, mental health, and social context influence the degree of responsibility.

This perspective is already integrated into many legal systems, which differentiate between intention, negligence, and coercion. Sapolsky tends to overlook these nuances, presenting a binary picture that does not reflect real complexity.

Determinism and the Meaning of Life

Another issue is the existential impact of radical determinism. If all actions are inevitable, the concept of personal meaning may be affected. Although Sapolsky argues that we can continue to live as if we had freedom, this position is strained: if freedom is an illusion, why would our choices matter?

Existentialist philosophers would argue that meaning derives precisely from the capacity to choose. Eliminating this capacity risks leading to nihilism or a form of passive fatalism.

An Alternative Position: Critical Compatibilism

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.

This position allows for the reform of the criminal justice system and social practices without entirely eliminating the notion of agency.

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.

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