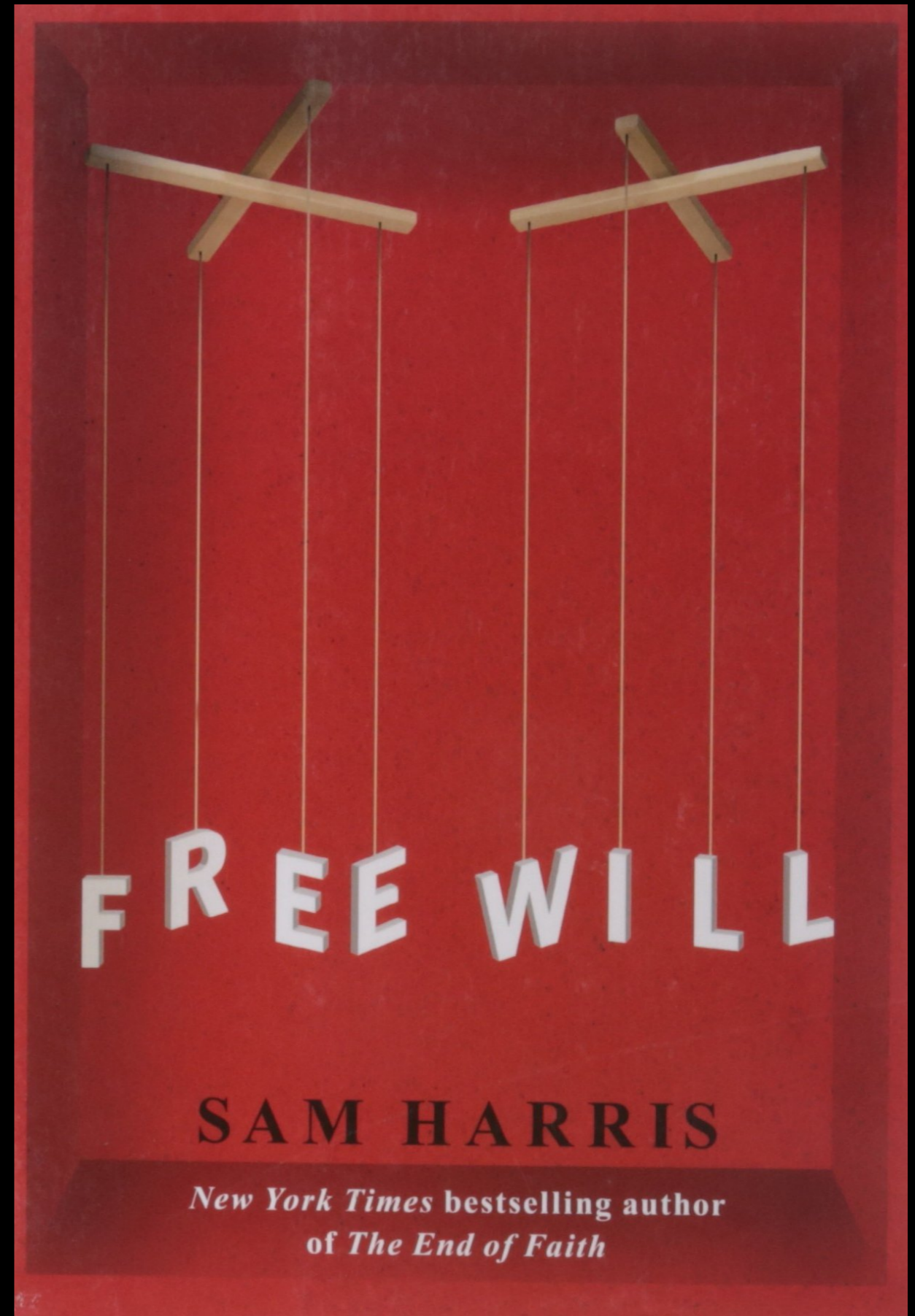


# Book Report Series 3:

## Free Will

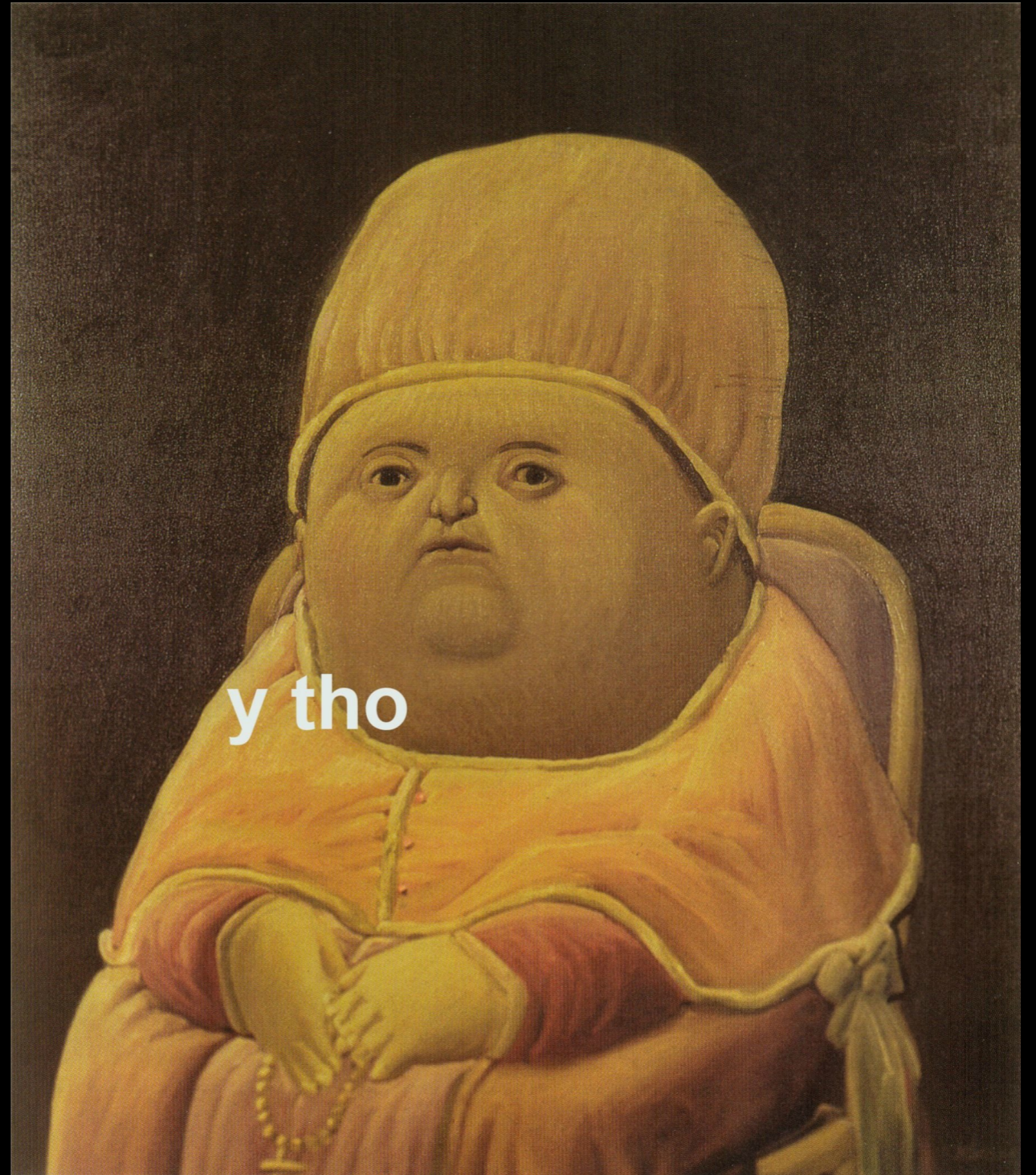
By Sam Harris

Patrick Drew - GSPS



# Why am I giving this talk?

- I like saying controversial things and trying my best to bring people along for the ride.
- I hope this will be fun.
- Maybe you'll take something away.





- Reasonable people can and do disagree about this topic. It has a rich philosophical history.
- I'm not asking you to believe what I do. Just to encounter a several-century old debate.

# A word of warning

- Some segment of the population finds these ideas psychologically destabilizing.
- Feel free to take a step out and focus on something else.



# The Takeaways:

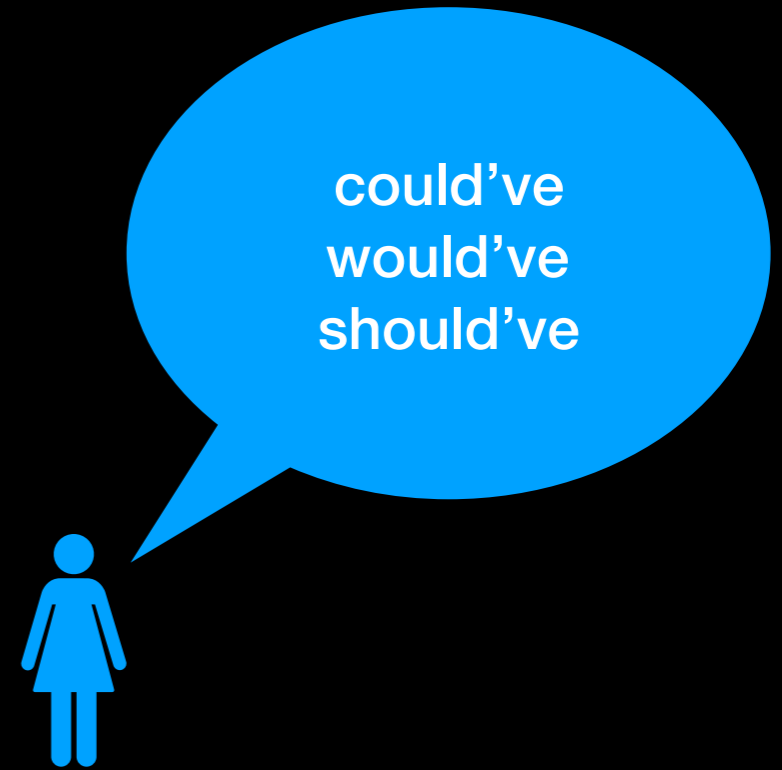
- Free will is an illusion.
- More understanding, forgiving.
- Less likely to take credit for things we didn't earn.
- Ideally makes us better, more humble people.



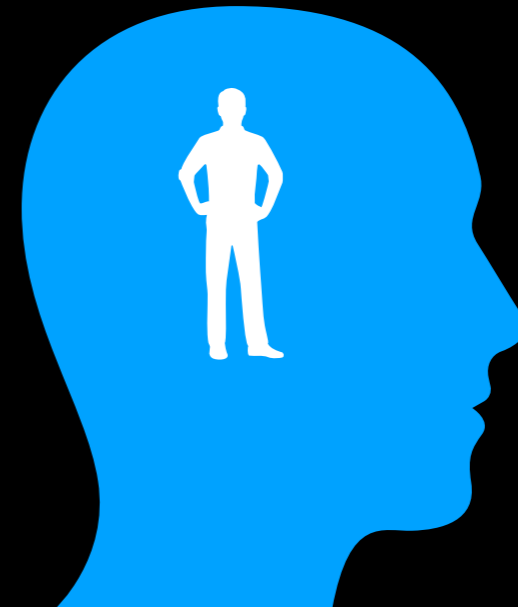
# Philosophy:

## Feels like it rests on two assumptions

1. We could have behaved differently than we did in the past.

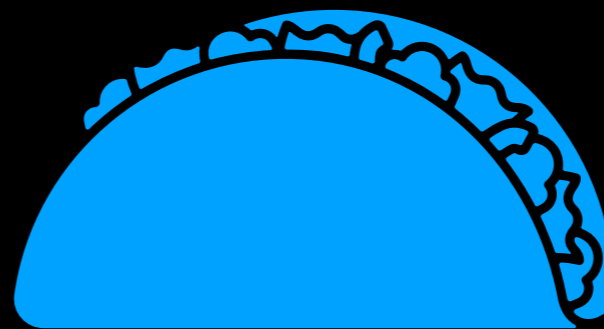


2. We are the conscious source of our thoughts and actions in the present.

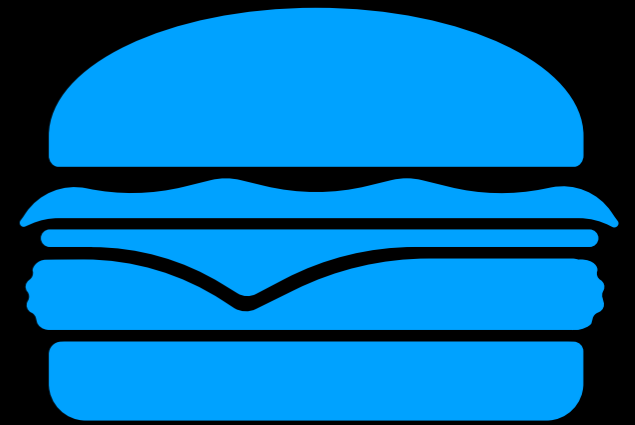


# Free will rests on two feelings

1. We could have behaved differently than we did in the past.



Choice A



Choice B

# Free will rests on two feelings

1. We could have behaved differently than we did in the past.



**Rewind the Universe to the precise state it was in**



# Free will rests on two feelings

2. We are the conscious source of our thoughts and actions in the present.



**But are there some things that force our hand?**

# Some things that limit our freedom

**Our Brains**



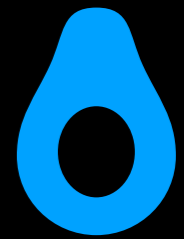
**Amount of sleep**



**Gene Expressions**



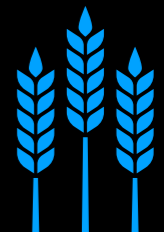
**Need to survive**



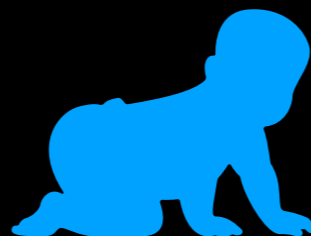
**Life Experience**



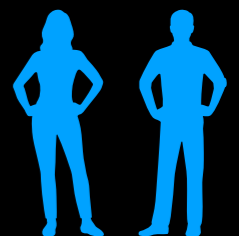
**Blood sugar**



**Upbringing**



**Human interactions**



# Three Philosophical Camps

1. Libertarians



2. Determinists



3. Compatibilists



# Compatibilism



(If you like this, check out Dan Dennett)

# Compatibilism

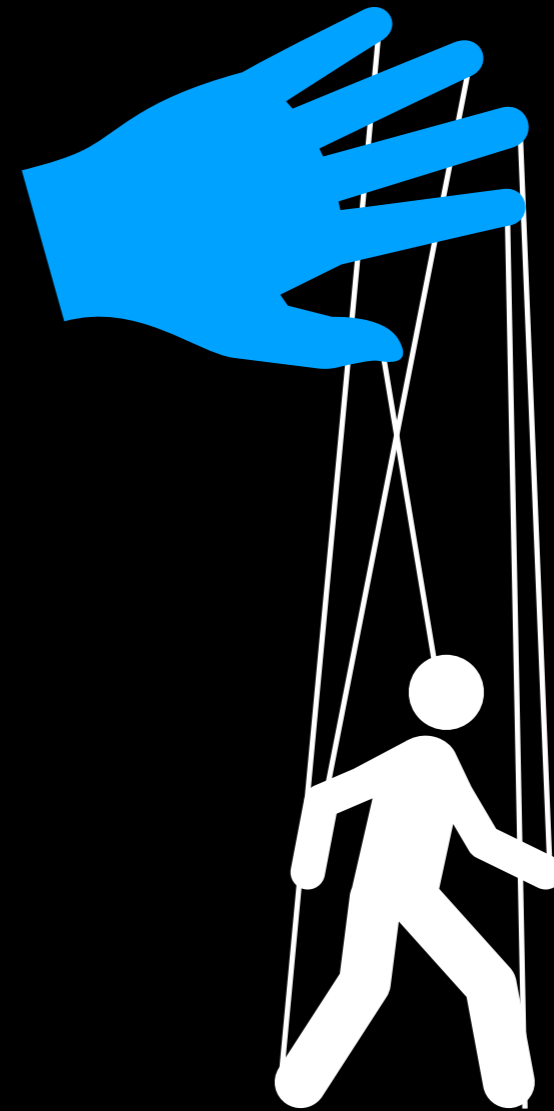


You can move freely according to the rules of chess.

It's not total freedom but it's good enough.

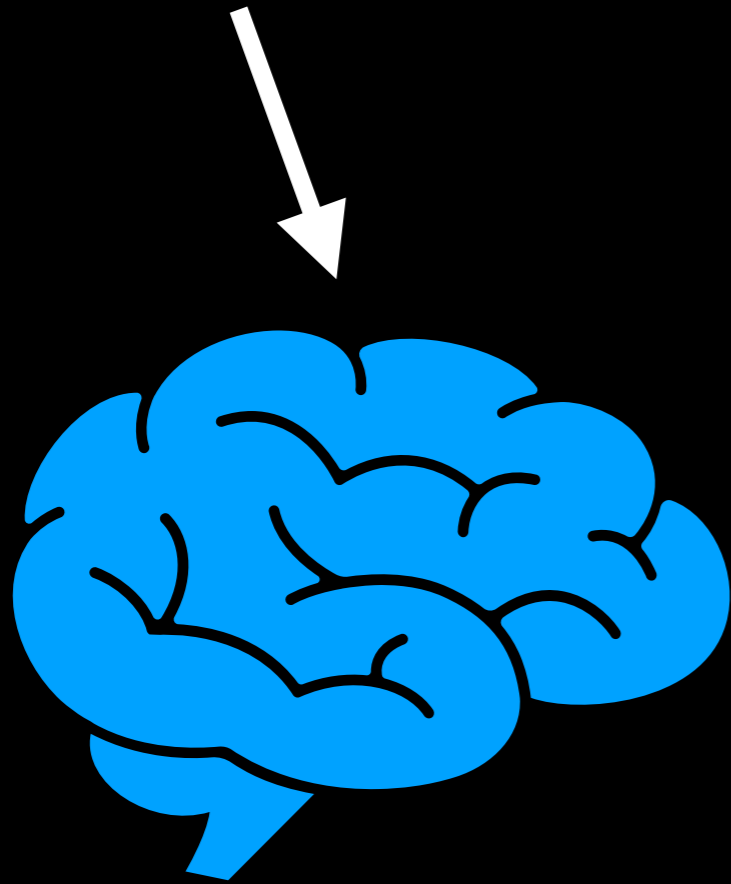
# Determinism

- We do not have free will because we are not in control (the version I'm arguing)



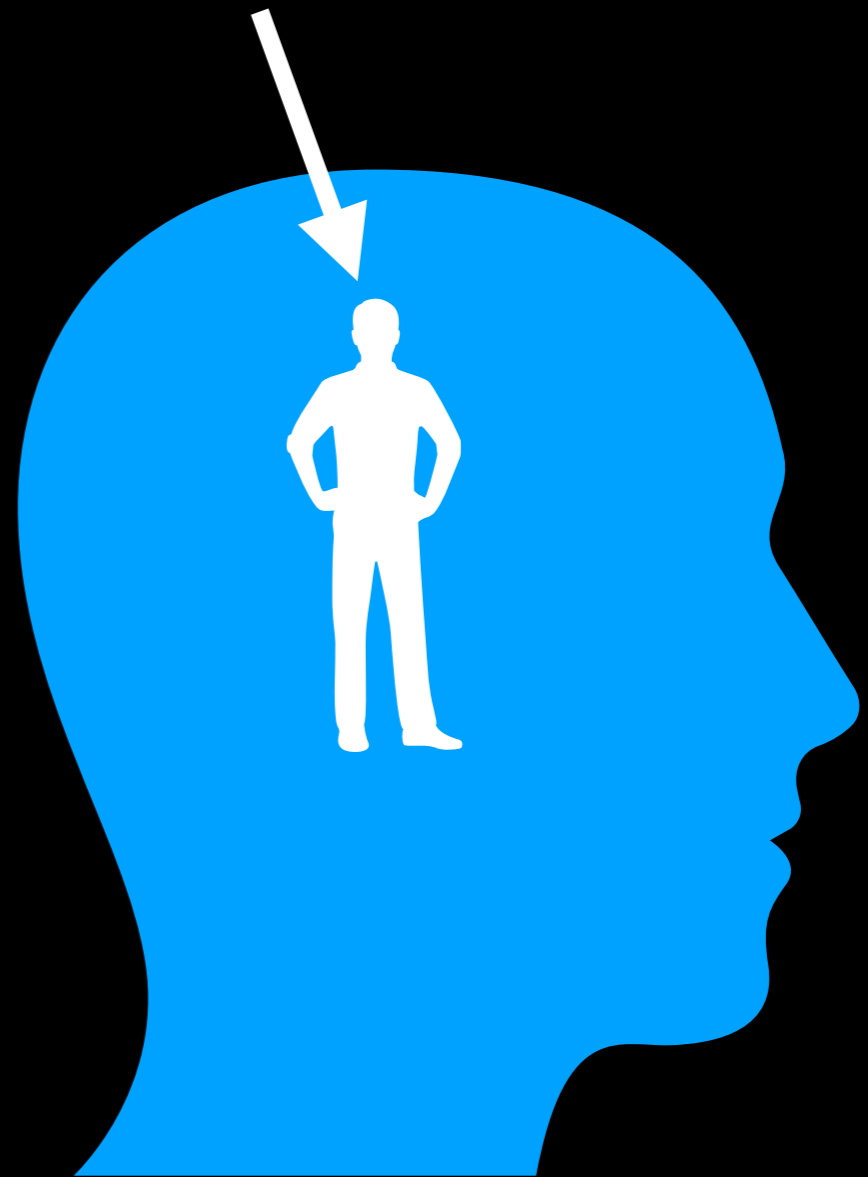
# What do I mean by “we”?

**In control to the degree it can be**



**(modulo upbringing, sleep, external forces)**

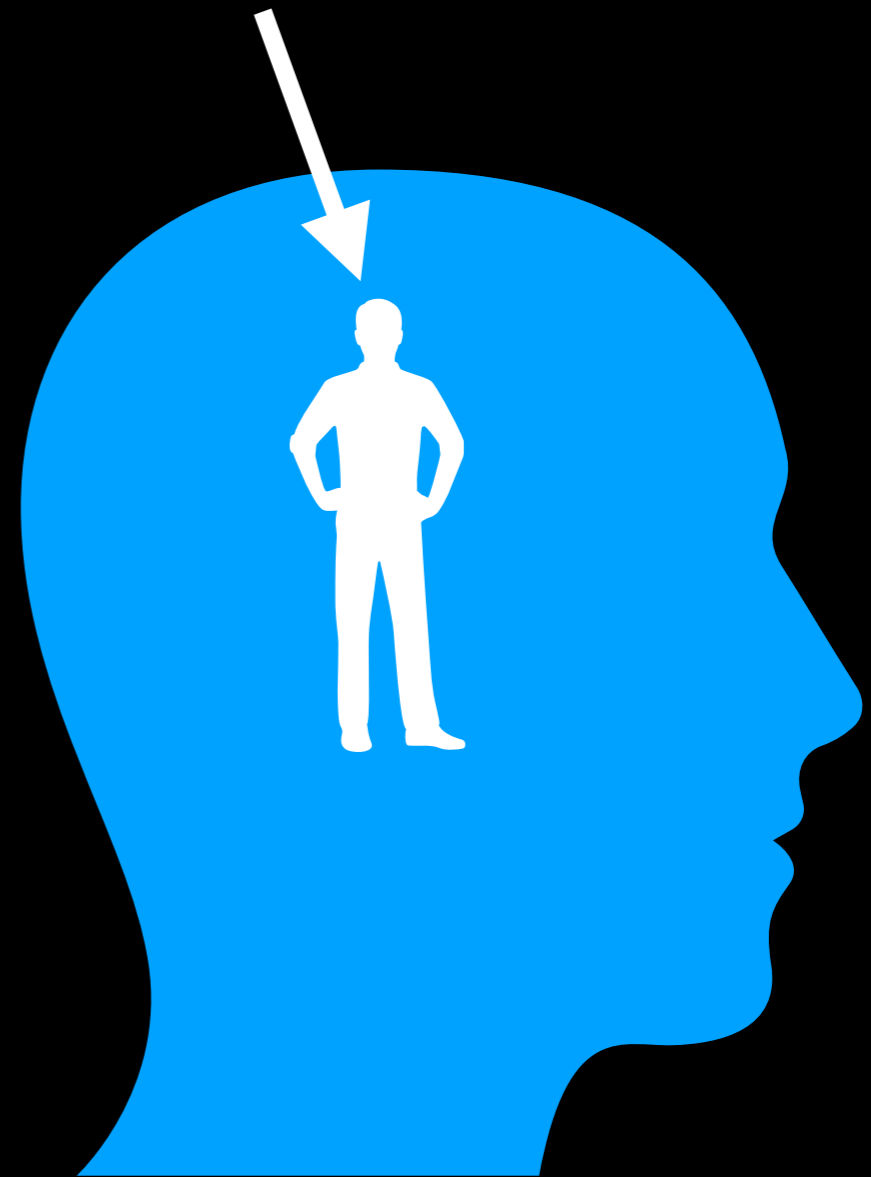
**Not in control**



# Who doesn't have control

- The thing inside you narrating your life
- That which rides around in your head behind your eyes
- That which experiences consciousness

**Not in control**





# Determinism

- Don't just take my word for it.
- You can verify for yourself that your conscious self does not author your thoughts.



# Exercise

Try now (or later) to focus intently  
on your inner monologue.

Witness your stream of  
consciousness.

Ask yourself,

“Do I create these thoughts?  
Do I choose these thoughts?  
Or do they just appear to me?”

This might take some practice.





- You may say, “Nope, I definitely just authored my thoughts. I thought about the most random thing I could imagine.”
- “I thought about fire trucks.”



- No free will because you cannot explain where fire trucks came from.
- Fire trucks came to your conscious self from processes inside your brain that you have no control over.

**You didn't pick fire trucks any more than you pick my next sentence.**

**You are a witness.**

# Let's try another

- Pick a city. Why that one?
- If because e.g. you go there a lot, shaped by experience, not free will.
- If unexplainable (or even if explainable), your brain chose that answer for you by processes you cannot control and have no influence over.



# Fun to think about

- What would it require to actually be able to choose your next thought?
- Perfect, simultaneous knowledge of all the possibilities of thoughts you could have?
- All while not actually having a thought? Because once I list possibilities in sequence I have just authored my next thought?



# Dan Dennett's response to Sam Harris

- A conscious author does not need to be conscious of the entire creative process in order to have ownership.
- Mozart: music comes to me and I write it down.
- Claims authorship because... Nobody else wrote them. He did.



# Summary of Camps

## Compatibilism

- You are constrained by the ocean's properties, but you're free to steer wherever you want.

## Determinism

- The same as compatibilist but the thing that is steering is outside your control.



# Back to the key takeaways

- Both camps - there is a great deal outside your control
- We should be more forgiving of each other for faults and wrongdoings.
- Can be more compassionate

**Both camps agree we can be kinder!**



# Back to the key takeaways

- We should take much less credit for our place in society.
- Didn't choose our parents, where we were born, opportunities.
- We did not choose to be born a psychopath.

**Both camps agree we can be kinder!**



# Common existential crises

- Fatalism
- Deliberative thinking serves no purpose
- Punishment and Justice
- Accountability



# Determinism is not fatalism

- If everything is determined, why should I do anything?
- This is itself a choice. (And not a good one)



**The fact that our choices depend on prior causes does not mean they don't matter!**

**Nothing happens on its own!**

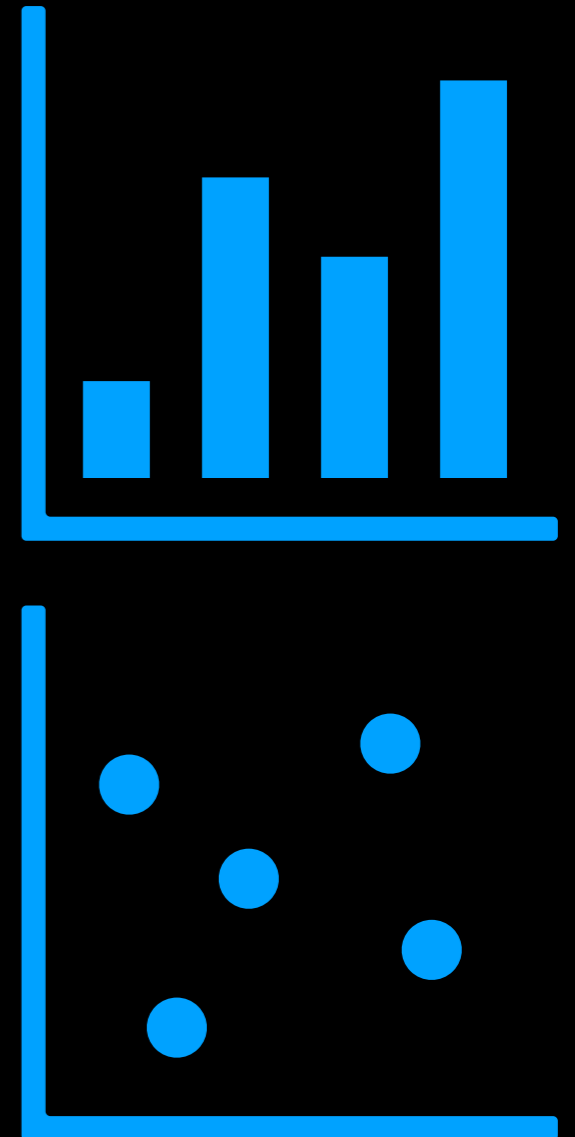
# Determinism is not fatalism

- Decisions, intentions, efforts, goals, willpower, etc., are causal states of the brain leading to specific behaviors.
- Behaviors lead to outcomes in the world.



# Nothing can change me

- May be no limit to how much an idea can change you.

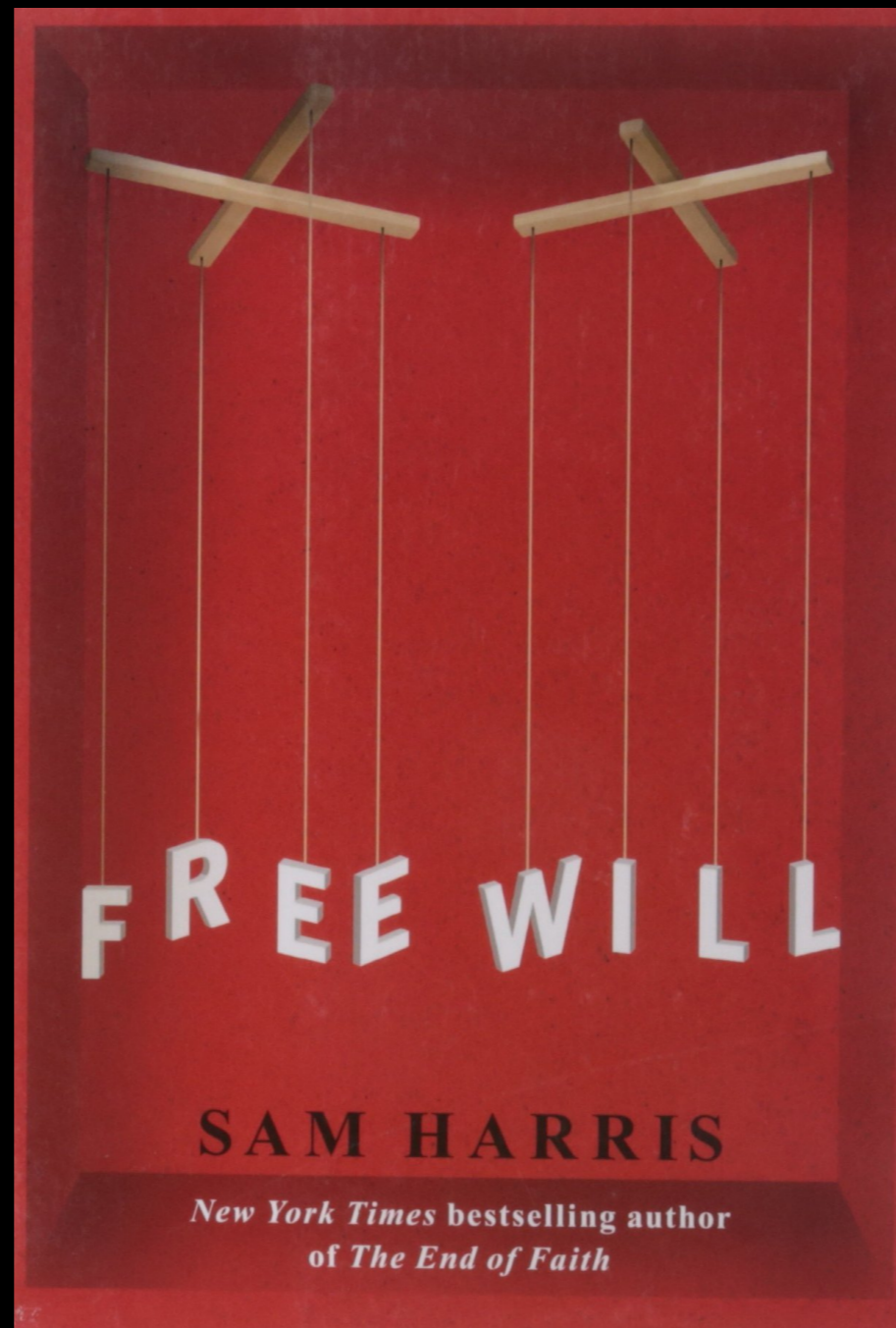


# Deliberative thinking

- Still necessary!
- May unconsciously shift in chair from back pain.
- Won't unconsciously decide it's time to go see a doctor.



# To the book:





# What to say about justice?



**We still need prisons, deterrents to protect and keep order in society.**

**Feel bad for people in these circumstances. Feel thankful you are not them. You wouldn't have done differently**

# What to say about justice?



**Can also focus more on rehabilitation**

# Thank you!

