

STEPHEN CAVE

No Choice in the Matter

The Free Will Delusion: How We Settled for the Illusion of Morality

By James B Miles

(Matador 272pp £9.99)

Freedom Regained: The Possibility of Free Will

By Julian Baggini

(Granta Books 239pp £14.99)

‘Free will is an issue of pressing social and political importance,’ writes Julian Baggini. This might provoke a splutter from those who think of it rather as the topic of arcane philosophical parlour games. But he is right, and never more so than in these times of growing inequality and overflowing prisons. As both of these thought-stirring books show, differing views on the existence of free will demarcate the politics of left and right and impact on all our lives. What is more surprising is that after two thousand years of trying, we might be making some progress towards a resolution.

Certainly the philosopher James B Miles thinks so. The truth is out there, he believes, and all that remains is for us to face up to the consequences. As the title of *The Free Will Delusion* suggests, he is convinced that we are fully determined beings, acting unswervingly in line with the laws of nature.

Miles rightly points out that in millennia of trying, no one has ever come up with a sensible account of how a truly free will could work. When you go to make a cup of tea, for example, you might colloquially say that you freely choose to do so. But on closer inspection, it seems that all the relevant desires (say, for caffeine) and beliefs (where the kettle is) are emanating from the physical system that is your brain. Where else might they come from? If our thoughts were instead spontaneous emissions from the ether or the product of weird quantum events, it would hardly make us freer.

A more interesting question for Miles than whether we have free will – given that he believes we obviously do not – is why anyone would believe we do. His answers are insightful. The first is that it often seems to us that we are choosing freely. You presumably do not feel compelled by forces beyond your control when you make a cup of tea. But, as Leibniz argued long ago,

this is only because we are unaware of the forces that compel us: the vast majority of the brain’s work happens below the level of consciousness. Secondly, we labour in the shadow of Christianity, which requires that we freely choose whether to be sinners or saints. After all, if we were compelled to sin by the biology God gave us, it would be harsh of Him consequently to burn us in hell for eternity.

Even outside Christianity, many thinkers have defended free will, because they believe it necessary for the institutions of praise and blame. But, as Miles shows, there is more to morality than moral responsibility. Indeed, he passionately argues that holding people ultimately responsible for their deeds is in fact terribly unjust. The underprivileged teenager who turns to drugs and crime is a product of his biology and his environment – neither of which he freely chose. To condemn him to a life of imprisonment and social exclusion is therefore only to compound the unfairness of his unfortunate start in life. Miles argues that the right-wing creed of responsibility (think of John Major’s infamous remark that ‘society needs to condemn a little more and understand a little less’) is a fraud to keep the poor poor and the rich rich.

Miles goes further still when he accuses those philosophers who defend free will of being part of this self-serving elite. Their theories, he suggests, are motivated by a desire to claim credit for their own successes in life. This personal attack (he mentions names) reveals this book’s main flaw: though the argument is interesting and important, the tone is polemical and repetitive. A more balanced book would also have been a more convincing one.

Philosopher-at-large Julian Baggini’s book *Freedom Regained: The Possibility of Free Will* is both balanced and convincing,

and has many other virtues besides. Baggini agrees with Miles that there is no ultimate free will: we are a product of biology and environment. But he parts from Miles in claiming that we can meaningfully talk about free will even though we cannot escape the chain of causal necessity.

What could such freedom mean? If you asked an artist or a scientist, a dissident or a drug addict, you would surely get very different answers. So that is just what Baggini does: while being firmly rooted in the philosophical literature, he also gets out and talks to people for whom freedom – or lack of it – is a real and pressing matter. The result is a wide-ranging, wise and stimulating survey.

At the heart of the book are two brilliant chapters in which Baggini talks first to the artist Grayson Perry and then to a group of political activists from Belarus, Somalia, Afghanistan and China. From his conversations with Perry, Baggini distils the subtle mix of inspiration and reflection at the heart of the artist’s work: how inspiration flows from the person like an emanation, seemingly free yet unwilling, while reflection entails the exercise of the critical faculties. Both are ‘in one sense simply the result of nature and all past experience’, but at the same time they are free in being the expressions of a unique individual, unforced and unrestrained.

In conversation with the dissidents, this lesson deepens. Political freedom is not just the right to do whatever we want. It is also having the right conditions to develop our internal capacity to be free. If we are more informed, we have more options; if we have trained our critical faculties, we understand the implications of those options better. Whether for an artist or for a voter in a new democracy, free will is a capacity that admits of degrees and that we can choose to develop.

Baggini uses this to try to rescue the idea of moral responsibility. Even though we are in one sense determined by biology and environment, he argues, we should still hold people responsible for their actions and not be afraid to dish out praise and blame. His reasoning is based on a fascinating discussion with a psychologist at Broadmoor high-security psychiatric hospital: getting the patients to take responsibility for their past actions, the doctor notes, makes them

feel more responsible for their future actions, which develops their capacity to resist dangerous impulses.

But Baggini barely touches on the dangers of blaming people for their lot. In the US, for example, the American Dream – a powerful myth of personal responsibility – results in the poor being held culpable for their poverty. Miles quotes the one-time

Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain: 'If ... you're not rich, blame yourself.' The result is little action to alleviate the causes of poverty, markedly low social mobility and growing inequality.

So the debate will go on, even if the great majority of thinkers, like these two, now reject anything like the classical idea of an absolutely free will. Miles is right that we

have not fully absorbed the consequences of this, while Baggini is right that there are nonetheless other ways to make sense of human freedom. Both have written stimulating books for those wishing to peel back some of the many layers of what it means to be free.

To order these books through our new partner bookshop, Heywood Hill, see page 32