

**Title:** “Neuroscientific challenges to free will and responsibility”

**Author:** Adina Roskies

**Readability:** Easy

**Possible Applications:**

Free Will/Determinism

Moral Responsibility

Moral Epistemology

Cognitive science

**Complimentary Texts/Resources:**

John Martin Fischer, Robert Kane, Derk Pereboom, Manuel Vargas [Four Views of Freewill](#)

Susan Wolf: "Asymmetrical Freedom"

Patricia Churchland "The impact of neuroscience on philosophy"

**Thesis:**

Roskies offers reasons for thinking that recent neuroscientific findings shouldn't cause us to worry any more than we already do about the possibility of free will or about our practical judgments regarding moral responsibility.

- Determinism on the brain level does not lead to determinism on the level of the universe.
- Neuroscience can't prove we are nothing more than mechanisms.
- The belief that our brains are deterministic won't lead people to abandon notions of moral responsibility integral to maintaining a functioning society.
- Our views about responsibility will not be threatened by facts/beliefs about determinism.
- Neuroscience doesn't threaten the practice of ethics.

**Abstract:** “Recent developments in neuroscience raise the worry that understanding how brains cause behavior will undermine our views about free will and, consequently, about moral responsibility. The potential ethical consequences of such a result are sweeping. I provide three reasons to think that these worries seemingly inspired by neuroscience are misplaced. First, problems for common-sense notions of freedom exist independently of neuroscientific advances. Second, neuroscience is not in a position to undermine our intuitive notions. Third, recent empirical studies suggest that even if people do misconstrue neuroscientific results as relevant to our notion of freedom, our judgments of moral responsibility will remain largely unaffected. These considerations suggest that neuroethical concerns about challenges to our conception of freedom are misguided.”

**Key Definitions:**

**Note that this paper has a helpful, visual schematization of the different positions surrounding the freewill debate. There's a glossary too that I've copied below:**

Agent causation: a type of causation due to agent choice, not itself caused by physical events.

Compatibilism: freedom is compatible with determinism. When coupled with a commitment to determinism, it is called soft determinism

Determinism: the state of the universe is entirely a function of physical law and the initial conditions of the universe.

Eliminativism: science will show our folk psychological concepts, such as belief, desire and so on, to be scientifically untenable, and that they should therefore be jettisoned.

Epiphenomenalism: mental states are physically caused but have no physical effects.

Hard determinism: the universe is deterministic and we are not free; freedom is just an illusion.

Incompatibilism: claims that freedom is incompatible with determinism. Incompatibilists who believe determinism is true are called hard determinists. Incompatibilists that believe that determinism is false are called libertarians.

Libertarianism: The universe is indeterministic, but we are nonetheless free. There are different types of indeterministic events: chance events and choice events. Human choice is not subject to physical law, but nonetheless stem from the operation of the will and is causally efficacious. This view does not seem to cohere with any scientific picture that we know.

Reductionism: High-level concepts can be fully accounted for in terms of lowerlevel concepts. In the context of the free-will debate, the claim is that mentalistic terms such as choice will be shown to be fully explicable in terms of brute mechanism.

### **Class Activities:**

- Before reading the article, you could ask students to visually represent the relationship between different terms within the freewill debate (perhaps in pairs or in groups). After reading the Roskies article, they could compare their schematization to hers.
- This piece could be used to start a conversation about interdisciplinary work more generally
- Roskies seems to be pretty confident that learning more facts about our brains won't have any significant impact on our practices surrounding moral responsibility. This is a descriptive claim. What *should* we do in the face of evidence that suggests our brains are determined? Is this even a coherent question?
- This paper could be used to get students to see the difference between metaphysical claims, epistemic claims, and ethical claims. They could go through the article and pull out examples of each. This would help them get the distinctions down but also demonstrate how interconnected and complicated philosophical inquiry can be.