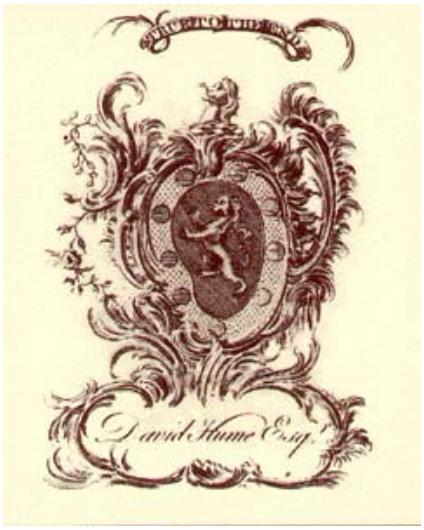

James A. Harris. ***Of Liberty and Necessity: The Free Will Debate in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy***
A. E. Pitson
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Book Review

James A. Harris. *Of Liberty and Necessity: The Free Will Debate in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. xv + 264. ISBN 0199268606, cloth, $74.

As the title of Harris's book indicates, it provides a survey of the debate about freedom of the will in British philosophy of the eighteenth century (interpreted as the period beginning with the appearance in 1690 of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and ending in 1828 with Dugald Stewart's *The Philosophy of the Active and Moral Powers of Man*). The book contains nine chapters, together with a Postscript which briefly discusses the direction taken by the debate in the later part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. While the chapters on Locke, Hume and Reid might be considered of particular interest, Harris succeeds admirably in bringing to light the distinctive contributions of other philosophers of the period, including lesser known figures like William King, David Hartley and Abraham Tucker. Harris's discussion is marked throughout by the high degree of scholarship displayed in his mastery of the material and the clarity with which the philosophical issues are expounded and discussed. His book succeeds not only in encouraging a greater degree of familiarity with a historical debate many of whose proponents are unduly neglected, but also in setting this debate in context and making clear its relevance to more recent treatments of the free will problem.

It is possible to distinguish a number of philosophical threads which run throughout Harris's discussion of the philosophers with whom he is concerned. The following are perhaps the most significant:

1) The focus of the disagreement between the libertarian and the necessitarian.
2) The libertarian view that we are conscious of free will as a matter of fact.
3) The distinction between moral and physical necessity.
4) The relevance of the notion of free will to theological issues.

We may appreciate something of the breadth and interest of Harris's discussion by seeing how these various themes are reflected in the views of philosophers engaged in the historical debate about free will. So far as 1) is concerned, as Harris makes clear in his Introduction, what is essentially at issue between the libertarian and the necessitarian is not the question of whether or not motives influence the will but, rather, whether they do so in such a way as to eliminate freedom of choice (10). For a necessitarian like Henry Home, Lord Kames, the only alternative to the necessitation of action by motives is action upon which motives have no influence at all. For a libertarian like James Beattie, however, the mind possesses a self-determining power which gives proof of the falsity of necessitarianism. An alternative approach is provided by Reid, who argues that motives stand in the same sort of relation to actions as advice, rather than providing the causes of actions. In the case of compatibilism (as represented, for example, by Hobbes), while experience reveals the necessitation of choice by motive, this is no threat to freedom since liberty is simply a matter of being able to act in accordance with one's choices rather than being free in respect of the choices themselves.

2) is a theme which provides Harris with another useful way of distinguishing the positions of the different philosophers to whom he refers. Thus, Harris suggests that Locke's view of freedom as consisting in our ability to weigh desires against each other reflects his concern with the experience of freedom rather than with the nature of the idea itself. Samuel Clarke—whose debate with Antony Collins is described by Harris as setting the terms for the free will debate for the rest of the eighteenth century—claims that our experience of the power of self-motion provides us with evidence for the reality of free will. For Kames, while the immediate efficient cause of action is the will as determined by the strongest motive, we nevertheless have a feeling of liberty which reflects the fact that in weighing motives we may be unable to tell from introspection which is the strongest. But in the first edition of his essay "Of Liberty and Necessity" Kames declares this feeling to be a deceptive one, given to us as an expression of divine wisdom and benevolence to make possible the sense of duty and obligation. Beattie, as a representative of the common sense approach to the question of free will, takes the doctrine of liberty

to be something of which we are provided with evidence by internal sense. Stewart also appeals to the evidence of consciousness in claiming that reflection when we act confirms freedom of the will. On the other hand, there are those philosophers who dispute the claim that we may appeal to experience in support of the belief in free will. According to Collins, for example, it is a matter of experience that we are determined in our acts of volition and choices. Hartley, too, denies that there is such a thing as the internal feeling of freedom; similarly, Joseph Priestley denies that we can be conscious of liberty in the form of an ability to have done otherwise. Philosophers like James Gregory and Alexander Crombie also express scepticism about the usefulness of consciousness as a means of settling the debate about liberty and necessity. The positions of necessitarians like Hume and Kames are distinguished by the fact that while recognising our natural feeling that we are free, there is also an attempt to explain this feeling away—in Hume's case, by contrasting the subject's viewpoint with that of the informed spectator.

As Harris indicates, these eighteenth-century philosophers may also, in many cases, be distinguished by their view of 3), the distinction between moral and physical necessity. Clarke's case for free will, for instance, appeals to the idea that even if the will is determined by the last judgement of the understanding, this is a moral motive, rather than a physical cause, whose effect on action is consistent with natural liberty. In the second edition of his "Of Liberty and Necessity" Kames distinguishes between physical necessity—under which we are passive—and moral necessity as an expression of active and voluntary action. It should be noted that on this view the truth of the doctrine of necessity is established by thought or reason rather than by consciousness, given that moral necessities do not feel like necessities. Somewhat similarly, Jonathan Edwards, as an opponent of libertarian freedom, employs the distinction between moral and physical necessity to explain how the necessary connection of volitions with motives is compatible with liberty. Gregory's libertarianism also appeals to the idea that the relation of motives to actions may be shown to be different from that of physical causes to their effects. There are, on the other side, those philosophers who question the distinction between moral and physical necessity. Clarke's opponent Collins is a case in point: since every cause is a necessary cause man himself is a necessary agent, while this is fully compatible with liberty properly understood. Hume famously rejects the distinction between moral and physical necessity in pursuit of his reconciling project; and Priestley regards the distinction between moral and physical necessity as one which is "merely verbal."

Finally, 4)—the relevance of the free will debate to theological issues—figures at a number of points in Harris's discussion. As we have seen, Kames initially appeals to the idea that the feeling of liberty is a deceitful one given to us as an expression of God's wisdom and providence. Edwards's attack on the idea of libertarian freedom

springs from the view that free will is incompatible with God's foreknowledge of human actions. Hartley accepts that a consequence of the doctrine of necessity is that God is the author of sin to the extent that he is the only agent having the power of motion; and similarly, Priestley regards God as the sole cause of all things, including human actions. Tucker is concerned to reconcile human freedom with divine providence, while Reid rejects necessitarianism in so far as it is committed to the view that God is the cause of evil. It might have been added that Hume's treatment of the free will debate also touches on its relevance to the problem of evil and the dilemma which is apparently encountered here by the theologian who regards God as the ultimate cause of everything.

Having noted these aspects of the various philosophical positions associated with the eighteenth century debate about free will, some comments on Harris's discussion would now be in order. As will be evident from the above, 2)—the notion that we may appeal to experience in support of the existence of free will—does provide an obvious source of disagreement among the contributors to the debate. This leads Harris in his Postscript to suggest that while the twentieth century version of this debate tends to focus on the compatibility of the concepts of moral responsibility and determinism, the eighteenth century philosopher reminds us that the issues involved are matters of everyday experience (235). This might appear to exaggerate the difference between the approaches taken by philosophers of these different periods. Hume's reconciling project, after all, explicitly focuses on the ideas of liberty and necessity; and while this may reflect his own rejection of the libertarian appeal to experience on behalf of free will, he is clearly not alone in his concern with such conceptual issues. In fact, the libertarian position in regard to 1)—that is, the claim that while motives influence the will they do so in a way which leaves us with freedom of choice—must in part, at least, reflect an understanding of what motives are and also what ultimately constitutes freedom of choice. As Harris's own discussion also reveals, Hume is by no means alone in his concern with the relevance of the idea of causation in this context: something which is, in any case, evident from the importance of 3) to the debate (including its bearing on 4).

So far as Harris's detailed treatment of particular philosophers is concerned, the chapter on Reid is one of the highlights of the book. Apart from its careful presentation of the complex and subtle manner in which Reid presents the view of belief in free will as a first principle, the discussion is also noteworthy for the interesting parallel drawn between Reid's response to skepticism regarding the existence of material objects and his response to the necessitarian rejection of free will. In expounding Reid's own account of freedom, and its appeal to the idea of agent causation, Harris notes Reid's failure to consider possible problems associated with this theory of action—such as the difficulty raised by Crombie,

to which Harris refers in the following chapter, that this theory "abstracts" the man from his appetites and passions as the immediate causes of his actions (213). Harris's treatment of Hume's reconciling project is another significant chapter which raises substantive interpretive issues. Harris suggests that Hume should not be regarded as a determinist who is committed to the view that natural effects are the product of necessary forces. This does, of course, touch on an important area of disagreement regarding Hume's view of causation which has been the focus of much recent discussion (the "new Hume" debate). Without commenting on the disagreement itself, one might question the basis on which Harris arrives at his own view of Hume, namely, that Hume's reference to a "new definition" of necessity as the basis for his reconciling project indicates that his position differs importantly from that of necessitarian predecessors like Hobbes (68). It is true that Hume's remark about all causes being of the same kind (in *Treatise* 1.3.14.32) is in part a criticism of Hobbes, but it appears that the arguments employed by Hume in this context are directed primarily against philosophers like Locke and Malebranche. It therefore remains possible that Hume's position is not, after all, so different from that of Hobbes. While there is obviously a great deal more that might be said here, Harris's attribution to Hume of a reductive account of necessity is clearly a controversial one (as he himself recognises).

It should be evident from the above that Harris's book is a major contribution to our understanding of the free will debate and the contributions to it of eighteenth-century philosophers. It is a reminder of the fact that even when the primary concern is to understand a historical debate in its own terms, this may enable us to identify more readily the essential issues at stake and the way in which they might be approached. Harris's book will be of great interest both to historians of philosophy and also those who continue to grapple with the philosophical problems associated with the free will debate. It is thoroughly to be recommended.

A. E. PITSON
Department of Philosophy
University of Stirling
Stirling, FK9 4LA
Scotland
a.e.pitson@stir.ac.uk