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Review of The Philosophy of Free Will: Essential Readings from the Contemporary Debates edited by Paul Russell and Oisin Deery

William Simkulet

Cleveland State University, w.simkulet@csuohio.edu

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Review - The Philosophy of Free Will

Essential Readings from the Contemporary Debates
 by Paul Russell and Oisín Deery (Editors)
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 Review by William Simkulet
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This is a collection of many influential philosophical essays on the topic of free will and is an exceptional resource for philosophers interested in the topic. True to the its title, almost every essay in this collection is essential reading for those interested in free will and moral responsibility.

The text is comprised of a thorough and engaging 26 page introduction by the editors, followed by 11 parts - each comprised of two or three essays and a short (usually one page) selection of suggested further readings. The book ends with a four page guide to further reading, a name index, and a subject index. In the introduction, the editors make it clear that in the past half century the free will debate has been thriving, and has become both complex and subtle. Many of the articles in this collection serve as a foundation for a large, intricate body of philosophical literature.

Although this is a great collection, it is not the best introduction to the problem of free will; each article is written with an academic audience in mind and in recent years there has been an attempt by many of the philosophers whose work has been collected here to represent their latest positions in a more accessible way. For an introduction to the topic of free will I suggest Robert Kane's *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (2005), or *Four Views on Free Will* by John Martin Fischer, Robert Kane, Derk Pereboom, and Manuel Vargas (2007).

In the introduction, the editors efficiently explain the role each essay plays in the overall debate, as well as its relationship to the other essays found in the same part.

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Because of the vastness of the ongoing topics in the free will debate a complete collection of the essential articles for each branch of the debate would be unwieldy; however if there is one place the editors of this volume failed, it is in each part's sparse lists of further readings. The further readings page could have offered a robust roadmap to the important debates that the articles have spawned, but instead the lists are notably incomplete. This is most apparent at the close of part one; which began with Thomas Nagel's excellent essay "Moral Luck," in which Nagel sets out four distinct problems of moral luck - the last of which he identifies at the classic problem of free will. The further readings page for part one leaves half of the page blank and is mostly devoted to the section title "The Free Will Problem - Real or Illusory?", followed by only three entries on the problem of moral luck. There are many notable works on this topic, but I was genuinely surprised not to see at least one of Michael Zimmerman's influential essays on the subject listed. Also, oddly, the four page "A Guide to Further Reading" found at the end of the book contains many vital resources, but is divided by source type, rather than topic.

The editors have done a good job of capturing many of the important debates surrounding free will; the remainder of this review focuses on two notable omissions.

The first omission occurs in part four - Responsibility and Alternate Possibilities, which begins of course with Harry Frankfurt's distinguished "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" in which he presents a case where an agent is purportedly morally responsible despite lacking alternate possibilities. These Frankfurt-style cases have encouraged a robust literature of their own, but it is generally agreed that the Kane-Widerker Objection (See Kane 1985, 1996; Widerker 1995) highlights a fatal flaw in Frankfurt's case. In their wake, David Hunt (2000, 2005) and Derk Pereboom (2005) have offered what are sometimes called Neo-Frankfurt-style cases, cases in which agents may have alternate possibilities, but in which these alternate possibilities are irrelevant to determining their responsibility. Notably Harry Frankfurt (2003/2006) claims that his case was never meant to show that one can be morally responsible while having no alternate possibilities, but rather that alternate possibilities are morally irrelevant. Fortunately the further readings list contains a good number of these articles.

To their credit, the editors include Michael Otsuka's "Incompatibilism and the Avoidability of Blame" in this part. Otsuka assumes Frankfurt's criticism of the principle of alternate possibilities succeeds, but offers a more robust, and ethically interesting, principle - the principle of avoidable blame - as a replacement.

Second, I believe the editors fail to draw an important parallel between Robert Kane's (1996) libertarianism and that of compatibilists John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1998, 2002). In part five - Libertarian Alternatives - Soft and Hard - the editors include a selection from Robert Kane, but Kane's account of moral responsibility has more in common with compatibilism than other libertarian theories. Kane is categorized as a libertarian because he believes that to be morally responsible for anything, an agent must first act in an undetermined manner; however unlike most libertarians Kane believes that this undetermined manner is merely a matter of chance and outside of the agent's control. After this undetermined event, the agent is morally responsible for her actions if and only if she is causally determined to see this indeterminism as self-forming, after which she is morally responsible for both her determined and undetermined free actions. Similarly, Fischer and Ravizza contend that to be responsible one must first be causally determined to take responsibility for her actions (where taking responsibility just is seeing one's self as the appropriate object of praise or blame despite those actions being causally determined by factors outside of her control).

The essays collected in this volume have made incredible contributions to the free will debate. It is remarkable to have so many influential works collected in this way, and anyone interested in the free will debate would benefit greatly from having this collection close at hand.

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William Simkulet, Applied and Professional Ethics at University of Kansas