Finding Sam Harris's Agency

A Second-Order Inquiry into Free Will, Affordance, and the Meaning Maker

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Abstract

Arguments against free will frequently proceed from the causal antecedents of thought and action to the conclusion that agency is illusory. This article examines whether that inference is sufficient. Using second-order inquiry, it distinguishes the conditions from which possibilities become available from the agentic processes through which those possibilities acquire contextual relevance, value, and selection. The resulting architecture—**Determinative Conditions → Affordance → Agency → Decision → Action**—preserves the causal contribution of biology, history, context, and neural activity without assuming that their role in constructing affordance establishes the necessity of the subsequent decision. Applied to Sam Harris's formulation that one can do what one decides but cannot decide what one will decide, the distinction permits the proposition to remain intact while altering its epistemic interpretation. The analysis does not attempt to prove free will. It argues more narrowly that antecedent causation may be necessary to explain decision without being sufficient to explain away agency.

Introduction

Sam Harris offers a concise challenge to free will: “You can do what you decide to do—but you cannot decide what you will decide to do” (Harris, 2012, p. 38). The proposition appears paradoxical until its central term is examined. What constitutes a *decision*? Does the first use of *decide* describe the same operation as the second? Before the statement can support the conclusion that free will is illusory, the terrain of decision must be defined.

This article does not begin by defending free will. It asks whether the premises used to deny it survive second-order epistemic inquiry. First-order reasoning interprets observations within an accepted explanatory frame. Second-order inquiry examines the definitions, assumptions, distinctions, and criteria upon which that frame depends, then follows them to their logical conclusions. A conclusion cannot possess greater epistemic warrant than the premises from which it emerges.

This distinction becomes critical when antecedent neural activity is interpreted as evidence that a decision has already been made. Libet and colleagues (1983) demonstrated that the readiness potential associated with a voluntary motor act preceded participants' reported awareness of intending to act by several hundred milliseconds. The observation establishes temporal precedence; interpreting that neural precursor as an unconscious decision introduces an additional claim. Subsequent research has further challenged the generalization of readiness potentials to decision-making: Maoz et al. (2019) found the characteristic readiness potential in arbitrary choices but absent or substantially diminished in deliberate, consequential choices. A neural precursor may contribute to what subsequently becomes possible without being equivalent to the agency that acts upon that possibility.

The distinction extends beyond neural timing. Causal constraint is not synonymous with determinism, an affordance is not synonymous with agency, and a precursor is not synonymous

with a decision. When these categories are collapsed at the first order, antecedent conditions can appear to constitute predetermination simply because their separate functions have not been examined.

The **terrain** is the contextual field that informs what becomes relevant, available, and actionable to the organism. Biology, genetics, developmental history, culture, previous experience, present circumstances, and neural activity may all contribute to what that terrain affords. Their influence need not be denied. What requires examination is what follows from it.

From the terrain emerge **affordances**: possibilities for action. An unbidden thought provides a simple example. We do not decide which particular thought will spontaneously appear. Its provenance may reflect innumerable biological, experiential, and contextual antecedents. Yet the appearance of the thought is not itself a decision. It can be ignored, examined, inhibited, reconsidered, or acted upon. The affordance establishes a possibility; it does not establish what will be done with that possibility.

Agency enters through the **meaning maker**. The meaning maker encounters what the terrain affords, constructs significance, evaluates possibilities, recruits criteria, inhibits or privileges alternatives, and selects a response. Decision is the selective outcome of that agentic process; behavior is its potential enactment.

The proposed architecture can therefore be expressed as:

Terrain → Affordance → Meaning Maker → Decision → Behavior

This formulation relocates the free-will question. The relevant inquiry is not whether an individual consciously created every thought, impulse, neural event, inherited disposition, or antecedent condition. It is whether the meaning maker can exercise agency upon what the terrain affords. Failure to author an affordance does not logically entail failure to exercise agency in relation to it.

Harris's argument becomes especially interesting at this boundary. His causal account can be provisionally granted: thoughts may arise unbidden; biological and experiential histories may shape what becomes available; neural events may precede conscious awareness. None of these observations, however, establishes that **the provenance of an affordance determines the decision made in relation to it**. To reach that conclusion requires another premise.

The purpose of this inquiry is therefore narrower than proving free will and more fundamental than defending it. It asks whether arguments against free will establish that antecedent conditions determine decisions, or whether they establish that decisions arise within a terrain of contextual constraints and affordances. Conflating those propositions risks placing the conclusion inside the premise.

The title of this article is intentionally lighthearted but methodologically serious. Rather than arguing against Harris, we follow his propositions Socratically to their logical conclusions. If Harris encounters competing explanations, evaluates them according to criteria, rejects some, retains others, modifies his reasoning when warranted, and ultimately selects the proposition that free will is illusory, a second-order question remains:

What is the meaning maker doing while deciding that it does not decide?

Perhaps Sam Harris's agency was never absent. Perhaps it became invisible because the inquiry was looking for agency among the antecedents and affordances that make its exercise possible.

The Terrain of Decision

Before asking whether a decision is free, it is necessary to establish what makes a decision possible. A decision does not occur in isolation but within a terrain that informs what is available, relevant, and actionable to an organism at a particular moment.

The concept of **affordance** provides the first important distinction. Gibson (1979) described affordances as possibilities for action arising in the relation between an organism and its environment. An affordance is therefore relational: what a context affords depends partly upon the capacities of the organism encountering it. Within the present framework, the concept is extended beyond the immediate physical environment to possibilities emerging within biological, experiential, cultural, and cognitive contexts.

An unbidden thought provides a useful example. A thought enters awareness without having been consciously requested. Whatever combination of antecedent processes contributed to its appearance, the individual did not first decide to produce that particular thought and then cause it to appear.

But the thought is not yet a decision. It is an **affordance**.

Once present, it can be attended to, ignored, questioned, inhibited, elaborated, compared with another possibility, or translated into action. The absence of conscious authorship over its appearance therefore establishes that the individual did not choose that particular affordance. It does not establish what the individual will do with it.

This separates two questions that become consequential in arguments about free will:

What made this possibility available?

and

What will be done with the possibility now that it is available?

The first concerns the construction of affordance. The second introduces agency.

Agency operates through the **meaning maker**: the capacity to construct significance from what the terrain affords and to evaluate possibilities according to criteria relevant to the present context.

The meaning maker need not have created the conditions it encounters in order to act upon them. Indeed, agency without antecedent conditions would have nothing upon which to operate.

Constraint therefore need not be treated as the adversary of agency. Constraint gives form to the field within which agency becomes meaningful. An organism for which every conceivable action were equally available, independent of context, embodiment, or consequence, would not thereby possess greater agency. It would lack an organized terrain within which a meaningful decision could occur.

The consequential distinction is therefore between the **provenance of an affordance** and the **decision made in relation to that affordance**. Even a complete account of why a particular thought, impulse, or possibility became available would establish the conditions of its appearance. It would not, without an additional argument, establish that those conditions uniquely determined what subsequently occurred.

Second-order inquiry therefore begins before asking whether a decision is free. It first asks whether the phenomena being offered as explanations of decision are actually decisions at all.

Neural Precursors Are Not Decisions

The distinction between antecedence and decision can now be examined experimentally. Libet and colleagues (1983) compared the onset of the readiness potential (RP) preceding a voluntary movement with participants' reported time of becoming consciously aware of wanting or intending to act. The RP began several hundred milliseconds before the reported conscious intention. The temporal sequence was clear: measurable neural activity preceded reported awareness of intention. What follows from that observation is less clear.

A neural event occurring before conscious awareness establishes **precedence**. To conclude that the earlier event constitutes the decision itself requires an additional inference. The distinction is

consequential because a precursor can participate in making an action possible without being equivalent to the decision that follows.

Maoz et al. (2019) tested this distinction under more consequential conditions by comparing arbitrary choices with deliberate decisions involving meaningful monetary donations. The characteristic RP appeared before arbitrary decisions but was absent or substantially diminished before deliberate decisions. The authors concluded that RP findings from arbitrary motor choices cannot safely be extended to deliberate decisions.

The finding introduces a second-order problem for interpretations of Libet. If the RP were a general neural signature of an already determined decision, its failure to appear comparably in deliberate decisions would be difficult to reconcile with that interpretation. What remains empirically secure is narrower: neural activity can precede reported conscious intention. What that activity **means** within the construction of a decision remains an additional question.

This distinction permits another interpretation consistent with the architecture developed here. Neural precursors may contribute constituents from which possibilities for action become available without themselves constituting the selection among those possibilities. On this account, the precursor belongs to the conditions from which decision becomes possible rather than providing evidence that the decision has already occurred.

The epistemic distinction is therefore simple:

Precedence identifies temporal order. Predetermination asserts causal necessity.

Evidence for the first cannot, without additional evidence, establish the second.

The Sequence Within Harris's Premise

Harris writes, "You can do what you decide to do—but you cannot decide what you will decide to do" (Harris, 2012, p. 38). The apparent paradox depends upon allowing *decide* to perform two

different functions without distinguishing them. At second order, the question is not whether the sentence is true, but what each use of *decide* refers to.

The second clause can be read as describing the determinative conditions from which an affordance emerges. We do not choose the biological history, previous experience, spontaneous thought, neural activity, or emerging circumstances that make a particular possibility available. Harris himself recognizes that present actions can alter the conditions under which subsequent choices become more likely (Harris, 2012). Such conditions can constrain what is afforded without yet constituting the decision made in relation to it.

The first clause concerns what happens once something is available to be decided. Within the present terrain, the meaning maker can evaluate contextual relevance, designate value, inhibit or privilege possibilities, and select a response. The two clauses can therefore be differentiated as a sequence:

Determinative Conditions → Affordance → Agency → Decision → Action

The distinction matters because *decision* can otherwise slide between two ontological positions. If the emergence of an affordance and the agentic response to that affordance are both called *decision*, the determinative provenance of the first can be transferred to the second without an additional argument. *I did not decide what became available* quietly becomes *I did not decide what I decided.* Once the two are separated, that inference is no longer sufficient. Establishing that antecedent conditions constrain what becomes available does not establish that they uniquely determine what the agent subsequently does with it. That would require a further proposition: that the determinative processes producing the affordance also necessitate the agent's response to it.

The future tense in Harris's second clause makes the distinction still clearer. One cannot presently decide what one will decide within a future terrain that has not yet emerged. Its affordances,

contextual relevance, and value have not yet been fully constituted. This does not eliminate agency; it locates agency within the contextual horizon in which decision becomes possible.

Read at second order, Harris's aphorism may therefore be less a refutation of free will than an unexpectedly concise description of the sequence through which determinative processes and agency converge. Determinative processes can account for the conditions under which possibilities become available while leaving open the question of what occurs when an agent encounters them. At that point, Harris could preserve much of his causal argument and still acknowledge a form of free will—although not necessarily the freedom from causation that the term often implies. Free will would instead describe agency exercised upon affordance: constrained by antecedent conditions without being equated with them.

If that distinction is admitted, the argument changes substantially. The question is no longer simply whether free will exists, but **what kind of freedom is required before an act of agency can legitimately be called free will**.

Perhaps Sam has free will after all—just not the kind he was looking for.

Conclusion

This inquiry did not attempt to prove free will. It asked a narrower question: whether the premises used to deny it are sufficient to warrant their conclusion. At second order, they do not yet appear to be.

Biology, history, neural activity, and context constrain what becomes available to an organism. Their causal contribution need not be disputed and may be necessary for an adequate account of decision. But what is necessary is not necessarily sufficient. Explaining the antecedent conditions from which an affordance emerges does not, by itself, establish that those conditions necessitate the decision made in response to it.

The distinction yields a coherent sequence:

Determinative Conditions → Affordance → Agency → Decision → Action

Within this architecture, determinative processes and agency are not competing explanations. They describe different operations within the construction of action. Free will need not require freedom from causation; it may instead describe agency exercised within the possibilities and constraints that causation affords.

Harris's proposition can therefore remain intact while acquiring a different epistemic meaning. We may not decide what becomes available for us to decide, and we cannot presently decide within a future terrain that has not yet emerged. Neither establishes that, when the relevant terrain does emerge, antecedent conditions have uniquely necessitated what the meaning maker will do.

Harris's causal argument may therefore be **necessary but not sufficient to explain away agency**. To cross that epistemic boundary requires an additional demonstration: that the conditions sufficient to account for what is afforded are also sufficient to necessitate the meaning, value, and decision subsequently constructed in relation to it.

Perhaps Sam Harris's agency was never missing. It was simply being sought among the conditions that made its exercise possible.

Whether Harris chose his publisher lies beyond the present inquiry. But *Free Will*, appropriately enough, was published by Free Press.

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