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Foundations of Free Will

Robert Bolton

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Is free will a reality, or is it just a popular belief which science has discredited? This is an issue which many people regard with mixed feelings. We nearly always think the will is free to create actions all of its own in cases where someone else is in the wrong. But when we are in the wrong it is all too easy to believe in things which conflict with such freedom or even exclude it. On the other hand, our own beliefs appear to us to be spontaneous, whereas beliefs which we reject seem to demand explanation by natural causes. Whether the will is free or not, it can have uncomfortable consequences in either case, but in this book these alternatives are not regarded as evenly balanced. The author is guided by a conviction that a denial of free will must mean a denial of the intelligence needed for this purpose. He concludes that the possibility of knowing the will to be free is a genuine one, while knowing that it is not free leads to unwelcome paradoxes: who or what pulls our strings to produce this effect? If we can answer that, what caused our answer? No attempt is made to minimize the impact of natural causes on everyone, but we are given an idea of the self which contains some realities not directly subject to nature: the ancient idea of man as a microcosm of all realities is made use of. The essence of consciousness is in a sense above nature, and this is taken to be the basis on which the free will can be developed so far that it can dominate the realm of nature and fate. Bolton makes much use of ideas from Plato and the ancient philosophers who followed him, and relates his ideas to Kant as well. The result is an original idea of the way in which free will can function harmoniously with forces which have no part in it. This absence of disruption is based on the idea that natural causes are mutually disruptive, and would be so even if there were no free agents among them. As in his other books, Dr Bolton helps the reader to a deeper understanding of the complex relations between God, the world, and the self, without facile reductions that eliminate realities we ought rather to be trying to understand.

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