

HOW TO LIVE WELL WITHOUT FREE WILL

Most people not only believe in free will, but assume that if we didn't have it society would fall apart. Gregg Caruso challenges this assumption and argues that belief in free will, rather than being a good thing, actually has a dark side and we would be better off without it. His book develops an ethically defensible and practically workable account of how we can live well – indeed, live better – without belief in free will. The book discusses the moral psychology of blame and anger, the intricacies of our moral responsibility practices, and how we can preserve love, morality, creativity, friendship, and criminal and social justice without free will. He also develops an account of virtue ethics and argues not only that it is consistent with free will skepticism, but that adopting the skeptical perspective can better help us achieve the virtues most important to human flourishing and well-being.

GREGG D. CARUSO is Professor of Ethics and Director of the Patrick J. Waide Center for Applied Ethics at Fairfield University. He is author of *Rejecting Retributivism: Free Will, Punishment, and Criminal Justice* (2021) and *Just Deserts: Debating Free Will* (2021), co-authored with Daniel C. Dennett.

“Gregg Caruso’s excellent new book, *How to Live Well without Free Will*, is clear, well-informed, and engaging. It is a must read for anyone who thinks we are better off believing in free will and just deserts.”

John Lemos, McCabe Professor of Philosophy, Coe College

“Most philosophers are compatibilists, admitting that we are physical beings subject to the laws of the universe . . . yet somehow still possessing free will. Caruso bravely (and correctly, I think) argues that free will is incompatible with the material world. In this book, he explores how we might live our lives after rejecting free will – what happens to morality, justice, creativity and even love? This optimistic work is deeply insightful, rigorously reasoned and even inspiring.”

Robert Sapolsky, Stanford University

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*For
Elaini and Maya*

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Preface

This book takes up a challenge that is both philosophical and deeply personal: how to live well – indeed, live better – without belief in free will. At first glance, abandoning belief in free will may seem destabilizing. After all, so much of how we think about morality, responsibility, love, achievement, and justice is grounded in the assumption that people are ultimately in control of their choices and justly deserve praise or blame accordingly. Yet I argue that letting go of this belief can be not only liberating but also morally and psychologically transformative. Rather than viewing the rejection of free will as nihilistic or paralyzing, I contend that it opens space for greater compassion, clarity, and connection. It frees us from the burden of moral anger and retributive judgment, inviting us to see ourselves and others as shaped by conditions beyond our control. This shift in perspective – what I call *optimistic skepticism* – enables a more honest and humane approach to personal development, interpersonal relationships, and social policy.

Drawing on philosophy, psychology, and everyday experience, this book offers more than a critique of belief in free will; it presents a constructive vision for life without it. It explores how we can still meaningfully speak of moral responsibility, virtue, love, friendship, creativity, and achievement while abandoning the notion that anyone deserves what they get in some ultimate, basic sense. By distinguishing between different kinds of responsibility and emphasizing forward-looking moral practices, we can preserve what matters most while discarding what distorts our view of human nature and justice.

A major theme of this work is the ethical and social potential of free will skepticism. From criminal justice to economic inequality, from parenting to personal growth, belief in free will often supports harmful narratives of blame, merit, and desert. Rejecting it clears the way for systems and relationships built on understanding, compassion, and evidence-based care. At the same time, this perspective does not call for moral passivity

or fatalism. On the contrary, it encourages us to respond actively and wisely to harm, to cultivate virtues like empathy, humility, and loving-kindness to reshape our world in ways that promote collective well-being. Ultimately, this is a hopeful book. It argues that living without belief in free will does not mean giving up on meaning, morality, or human dignity. It means rethinking them in ways that are truer to our shared condition – and more capable of supporting lives that are just, kind, and deeply fulfilling.

Since this book represents the culmination of work I've done over the last dozen years, I would like to thank all the audience members, reviewers, and colleagues who have provided comments, critiques, encouragement, and challenges that helped sharpen my thinking and deepen my understanding along the way. First and foremost, I would like to thank Derk Pereboom, Thomas Clark, Eric Peterson, and Elaini Caruso for reading an earlier draft of the book and providing extremely helpful feedback. I would also like to thank Bruce Waller, Derk Pereboom, and Neil Levy for their profound influence on my thinking, as well as Daniel Dennett, Elizabeth Shaw, Farah Focquaert, John Martin Fischer, Robert Kane, Owen Flanagan, John Lemos, Katrina Sifferd, Eddy Nahmias, Oisin Deery, Manuel Vargas, David Shoemaker, Thomas Nadelhoffer, Sofia Jeppsson, Alfred Mele, Robert Sapolsky, David Rosenthal, Benjamin Vilhauer, Taylor Cyr, Matt Flummer, Helen Steward, Kelly McCormick, Daniel Speak, Kevin Timpe, Andrei Buckareff, Michael Corrado, Ted Honderich, Leigh Vicens, Justin Capes, Raff Donelson, Justin Coates, Josh May, Anneli Jefferson, Erin Kelly, Craig Agule, Victor Tadros, Saul Smilansky, Stephen Morse, Stephen Morris, Per-Erik Milam, Justin Caouette, Susan Wolf, Nadine Elzein, Alec Walen, Robert Talisse, Josh Weisberg, Tamler Sommers, Chloe Kennedy, Robert Wallace, Michelle Ciurria, Philip Swenson, David Hunt, William Hasker, Patrick Todd, Robert Hartman, Gabriel De Marco, Robyn Repko Waller, Gunnar Bjornsson, Peter Ulric Tse, Adina Roskies, Dana Nelkin, Brian Earp, Christian List, Christopher Franklin, Timothy O'Connor, Helen Beebe, Micheal McKenna, Shaun Nichols, and Josh Nobe for helpful comments, conversations, criticisms, and/or inspiration over the years. One of the great highlights of my career has been being part of a warm, supportive, and encouraging community of scholars working on free will and moral responsibility – a group whose intellectual generosity and camaraderie have continually inspired and sustained me. Last, I would like to thank Zhan Li, Carl Scheraga, and Christine Segal for their support and encouragement while writing this book.