

Reason and Practice

A Modern Introduction to Philosophy

by [Kai Nielsen](#)

reviewed by [Jim Farmelant](#)

Early last June, I found in a used bookstore Kai Nielsen's 1971 philosophy textbook *Reason and Practice: A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*. As far as I can tell the 1971 edition is the only one ever published.

The book itself is probably the best introductory philosophy textbook that I have ever run across. It is clearly and lucidly written, and does not talk down to the reader. Although it starts out by presenting arguments that are fairly easy to comprehend, as the reader proceeds through the book, she will find herself confronted with increasingly sophisticated argumentation and analysis. Nielsen writes as an analytical philosopher, and finds nothing to be ashamed about on that score. In the first part of the book he takes on what else, but the issue of free will versus determinism. Nielsen, as he himself makes clear, is a determinist and a compatibilist. But in the book he approaches the issue in a Socratic manner, first presenting Holbach's case for hard determinism, then in the following chapter presents Dostoyevsky's case for free will as irrational choice, then in the chapter after that William James' case for free will. In the following chapters, Nielsen argues that determinism, while not conclusively demonstrable, constitutes a genuine hypothesis (that is, it is in principle falsifiable) and states why he considers it to be a reasonable hypothesis. He argues for compatibilism, and uses that to defeat some standard objections to determinism. He discusses the implications of determinism for issues concerning responsibility, including implications for criminal justice.

Indeed, he devotes an entire chapter to assessing the implications of determinism for criminal justice, titled appropriately enough

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