John Baer, James C. Kaufman, and Roy F. Baumeister (eds.)

Are We Free? Psychology and Free Will

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Free will used to be a problem best left to philosophers who, after all, make their living trying to solve the unsolvable. Things started to change when Benjamin Libet discovered that simple motor actions are preceded by a readiness potential starting 350 ms before the subject is consciously aware of an 'urge' to 'voluntary' action; during the past 25 years, neuroscientific research has been thought relevant to the free will debate.

Simplifying somewhat, neuroscientists are claiming that free will is impossible because our actions originate in our brains, and our brains are deterministic causal systems. Philosophers respond that this is a category mistake because freedom is to be found in the realm of mental reasons, not in the realm of physical causes. The neuroscientists in turn point out that, since reasons can make a difference only via deterministic neurophysiological processes, the philosophers' suggestion is of little help. Recently, social psychologists like Daniel Wegner have joined this melee, arguing that, since the *feeling* of willfully doing something can be separated from the *act* of willfully doing something, the former is an 'illusion' and not a reliable indicator of an authoritative free agent or self.

The situation is confusing, to say the least. Among the things one would like to know are: (1.) What, exactly, is the empirical evidence? (2.) Is the claim that free will is

illusory supported by the evidence, or is it based on philosophically myopic interpretations of the evidence? (3.) What can the empirical sciences contribute to the free will debate, assuming any conclusive experiment remains elusive because there will always be scope for philosophical re-interpretations? In the case of neuroscience, these sorts of issues have been addressed in Susan Pockett *et al*.'s *Does Consciousness Cause Behavior*? (MIT Press, 2006). For psychology, there is now this new book. It brings together 17 papers, written mostly by psychologists but also by cognitive scientists and philosophers, and promises to look "both at recent experimental and theoretical work directly related to free will and at ways psychologists deal with the philosophical problems long associated with the question of free will" (pp. 3–4).

(1.) *What is the empirical evidence?* Two lines of evidence from social psychology seem to threaten the possibility of free will. On the one hand, Wegner and colleagues argue that, since subjects can be lured into feeling they willfully did something they in fact did not do and, conversely, can act without reporting a feeling of being the actor, the experience of willfully acting is a *post hoc* interpretation by our brain and as fallible as any other causal interpretation (Wegner, ch. 11). On the other hand, the research of John Bargh and colleagues on *automaticity* suggests that most of our everyday behavior is determined, not by our conscious intentions and deliberate choices, but by mental processes that are unconsciously triggered by extraneous, environmental factors (Myers, ch. 3; Bargh, ch. 7; Kihlstrom, ch. 8, on the other hand, argues that automaticity is not as widespread as Bargh claims).

(2.) *Unimpeachable evidence or mere interpretation?* Regarding Wegner's experiments concerning the dissociabilty of the feeling of agency and *de facto* agency, it ought to be kept in mind that to show that the feeling of agency is *sometimes* illusory is

not to show that it is *always* illusory and thus never an indicator of freely exercised will (Mele, ch. 18).

Regarding Bargh's research on automaticity, it is usually taken for granted that, if our actions spring mostly from automatic and unconscious mental processes, then we are not as free as we like to suppose (Myers, ch. 3; Bargh, ch. 7). But why this should be so? One possibility would be to claim that, for an action to count as free, it must be due *only* to factors of which the agent is conscious. However, no one, not even libertarians it seems, would accept such a strong view (see Nichols, ch. 2; Dweck and Molden, ch. 4; Shariff *et al*., ch. 9 for the different conceptions of free will). What, then, is the connection between automaticity research and the free will debate? Compatibilists (Bandura, ch. 6; Dennett, ch. 12; Baer, ch. 16) argue that since free will is compatible with determinism they are immune to empirical challenges that purport to show that our actions are neurally determined. According to compatibilism, we are free if we are *in control* of our actions in the sense that our actions accord with our consciously reflected beliefs, desires, dispositions and values (see Bandura, ch. 6; Roediger *et al*., ch. 10; Howard, ch. 13; Miller and Attencio, ch. 14 for the notion of 'control'). But automaticity research seems to suggest precisely that we do not exert this kind of control because the goals of our actions can be induced in us by environmental factors without us being consciously aware of it. A striking and rarely noticed consequence of this is that compatibilism could be true and free will nevertheless impossible.

(3.) *What else can psychology contribute?* Is our folk notion of free will a compatibilist or an incompatibilist one? Usually, this is regarded as a purely philosophical question. However, recent experiments in psychology (Nichols, ch. 2) seem to suggest that the folk concept of free choice (which is already employed by

children) is incompatibilist because it involves the idea that agents could have done otherwise than they did.

Another area where psychology can contribute to the free will debate, even if it cannot decisively resolve it, has to do with what would happen to our moral, legal, and social system if free will turned out not to exist. This, too, has been taken to be a purely philosophical question. Yet recent psychological research suggests that, when subjects are induced to believe that determinism is true and free will illusory (see Pinker, ch. 17 on the threats of determinism), they behave less ethically than when being primed neutrally or pro-free-will (Shariff *et al*., ch. 9). One suggestion for further research would be to test whether subjects' tendency for *blame* and *praise* are equally diminished by a belief in determinism, or whether, as I would predict, they continue to hold people responsible for the good things done, but not for the bad ones.

For readers new to the field and with interests broader than the purely philosophical, the book contains valuable background material covering the basic arguments, positions, and distinctions. One may of course quibble over the details of some contributions, but overall they are interesting and unlikely to lead anyone seriously astray. The book's most important virtue, perhaps, is that it moves beyond the largely theoretical libertarianism vs. compatibilism and determinism vs. indeterminism arguments that have shaped the philosophical debate hitherto, and instead focuses on some interesting and potentially more constructive narrower issues (e.g. the notion of 'control') to which psychology can fruitfully contribute.