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The Bearer of Morality

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A. Introduction

Possessing free will in manipulating one's own actions has been an unambiguous belief as if it is an undisputable fact. Our acts certainly are governed by our conscious minds, and are mirrors of our mental decisions, aren't they? The glimpse of a flashing thought that we fail to exert perfect control over our actions seems absurd to the majority. However, certain experiments have provided compelling evidence to justify this radical idea that most of us would be eager to reject. It has therefore become an inexorable controversy that we reflect upon matters of free will, ethics and more.

B. Background

One of the prominent experiments challenging the idea of free will was laid down by Benjamin Libet, in which he asked volunteers to lift a finger whenever they wanted to and recorded the electrical activity in their brains throughout the process. A readiness potential was recorded 200 milliseconds before the person felt the urge to move their finger (Kandel 191). These

electrical signals are indeed signs that certain matter precedes our conscious decision of performing an action, conveying a lack of free will. In other words, a decision has been made even before our conscious decision, and it is neither accessible nor governable by our conscious mind. Even when a choice is made “freely”, it is largely initiated in an unconscious manner.

The significance of the issue lies beyond the presence or absence of free will. The absence of free will place moral responsibility in question. Free will is highly related to moral responsibility, with some philosophers even taking a step forward to define free will as whatever is necessary for moral responsibility to exist (O’Connor and Franklin). To judge whether a person is morally responsible, we assume that they possess certain powers and capacities, and have hence exercised them (Talbert). Therefore, we could not accuse and ask one to bear the responsibility for their actions if they had not voluntarily exercised them, at least not in a conscious status. In the absence of free will, a more severe yet inevitable societal consequence is that every member of the society would be placed in a morally-empty state, such that any form of social contract imposing restrictions on one’s actions becomes void and obsolete. These unfathomable consequences have prompted numerous philosophers to address the controversy.

Personally, I am of the opinion that free will does exist and one does need to bear their moral responsibilities. Further illustrations are made as follows.

I. Illusion or Not

Based on the results of Libet’s experiment, it seems that our actions are predetermined by an unknown factor, and it could be a sheer illusion that our beliefs exert control over our actions. If our conscious mind truly does not

play a part in the initiation of our actions, we could be simply rationalizing what has happened as Kandel has proposed (Kandel 192).

Nonetheless, the illusion is purely a time-based conclusion considering only the chronological order by which different phenomena take place. Indeed, our conscious thought process might not be the very first step in the chain of events leading to our actions. This does not, however, dismiss the existence of free will if we look into the definition of it.

Free will is very commonly defined as the ability to choose to do or not do something (O'Connor and Franklin). To assess whether free will is present, we must consider the events as a whole and evaluate whether a choice-making process is involved instead of overly focusing on a particular frame. Kandel has drawn a similar conclusion that we cannot infer the sum total of neural activity merely by looking at a few neural circuits (192). Our conscious thought process not being the initiating factor does not necessarily mean we have lost control over our actions.

As Libet has proposed, while the initiation of a voluntary action might occur in an unconscious part of the brain, consciousness is recruited to approve or veto the action itself (Kandel 192). This is echoed by psychologists Richard Gregory and Vilayanur Ramachandran's statement that our mind does have free won't even if it may not have free will (Kandel 192). In this sense, our ability to choose whether to perform an action or not is still intimately involved. Our conscious mind gates our action-making process and plays a pivotal role in determining whether the action eventually will be performed or not regardless of the initiating factor. Since there is choice in the course of operation, there must be free will as well.

Some would argue that our consciousness is only recruited to evaluate the decision after it has been initiated subconsciously. In essence, we only

have veto power against anything that has been proposed by our unconscious mind, but do not have the power to initiate something spontaneously. Therefore, we, at best, have free won't but not free will. Nonetheless, most humans are able to respond adequately to different circumstances and it is thus safe to assume that our subconscious mind does not limit ourselves to a narrow range of actions. It can thus be concluded that by having free won't, we still have nearly full access to the spectrum of reasonable decisions that we really need. In a sense, the degree of free will we earn by having free won't is more than sufficient for our daily operations. Having free won't is therefore not significantly different from having free will.

II. Nature of the Signal

If we conclude that free will does not exist merely because there is a preceding brain activity, then this particular brain activity must embody the true will, the owner of which remains unknown. Yet, several problems are then identified.

In terms of the expression of free will, the readiness potential is too unsophisticated to be a candidate factor representing our free will. It is obvious that the electrical potential, with its limited variation in magnitude and frequency, can never translate or represent the whole spectrum of actions that free will can command. Human actions are not binary—they vary not only in the sense of doing or not doing. They vary in degree and their consequences as well. A light pat on one's shoulder could be interpreted as an accolade, but the same action exerted with a larger force could become a violent act. The variations in one's motives are even more complicated, often involving considerations of the circumstances and moral judgement. These should not be what a single electrical potential can convey. Therefore,

the readiness potential is at the maximum part of our free will but not the whole of it. The conscious thought process immediately following the readiness potential allows room for much more intricate mental decisions such that it likely constitutes a major part of our free will.

Functionally speaking, the accuracy of Libet's prediction of actions through the presence of readiness potential only yields an accuracy of roughly 60% (Fischborn 499). If the readiness potential comprises the free will, the resulting action should always readily conform to the electrochemical signal. Yet, it is shown that the presence of the signal can contradict the presence of an action. Based on this statistic, it would be insensible to claim that the readiness potential truly represents the entirety of our free will but we sometimes go against our free will. It is much more reasonable to conclude that the readiness potential would at best constitute part of our free will, but surely not the whole of it. If a readiness potential is recorded but no action is executed, it could be that the action is disapproved by conscious inference such that no action is produced. It is likely that our free will is the sum of the readiness potential and our conscious decision in that case.

Tackling the root, who is the owner of this overpowering true will? While much of Aristotle's metaphysics is becoming less relevant in modern days, some of his ideas do provide insights for us to resolve the problem at hand. Aristotle believes that a property must be a property of something, such that a subject is present to claim the property (Lindberg 19). In this case, if free will is said to be absent because human will is preceded by a readiness potential, this overpowering free will represented by the readiness potential must also be a free will of someone or something. Since it is coming out of our unconscious mind, which is still part of us, theoretically we could still claim the ownership of this true free will (and therefore, we

have free will). If we do not consider it to be our free will, an ultimate owner is left unfounded. A free will that is deprived of its owner appears largely insensible.

III. Consciousness and Unconsciousness

Putting aside the notion that our consciousness does get involved in the decision-making process, even if free will truly stems from unconscious brain activity and decisions are made unconsciously, it must be noted that our unconsciousness is not completely out of our reach and uncontrollable as illustrated below. Therefore, this should not be a complete excuse of performing morally wrong actions.

Freudian theories are often discredited for their extreme takes on sexuality and childhood development, nonetheless the core theories of the three psychic agencies still hold their ground or even have parallels in contemporary psychology. Freud has argued that the id was the only mental structure present at birth, such that morals (represented by superego) are initially absent (Kandel 179). It can thus only be constructed based on the accumulation of conscious experience, particularly through education, experience with social norms etc.

Poincaré shares a similar viewpoint as well. He believes that fruitful unconscious work must be preceded by preliminary conscious effort. In his analogy, he believes that conscious work liberates some atoms off the wall, allowing them to circulate and collide in unconscious status, ultimately producing fruitful results that would surface in the second period of consciousness. The agitation of the atoms are, according to Poincaré, imparted to them by our will (174–175). In this regard, our conscious will does play a part in setting off determining our unconscious mental processes. Our unconscious ego is therefore not completely baseless but grounded in

and constructed by our conscious thoughts. It is very much still a part of us and the decisions derived from unconsciousness are to some extent still our own decisions.

C. Moral Controversies

Free will is very much related to moral responsibility. Some might even regard the understanding of free will to be derivative from the understanding of moral responsibility (O'Connor and Franklin). As such, if free will exists, so must moral responsibility.

Legal responsibility is very much similar. If free will exists, so must legal responsibility. Modern legal systems are grounded in the notion that free will is ubiquitous, though it is really out of practical value preference rather than metaphysical considerations (Jones 1035). Nonetheless, we have proven through the arguments in this essay that free will very much still exists, though it might present itself in less direct forms (e.g. free won't, unconscious initiation guarded by conscious mind) than we would expect. Therefore, existing legal constraints, which endorse the presence of free will, should still be functional.

While legal systems do not really address metaphysical free will, it is notable that they do adequately address various issues like consciousness, mental states, capacity for rationality in determining whether one should be held responsible (Morse 252). Laws also evaluate not only the moral judgement or motives behind an action, but also its consequences. For example, one can be legally charged with manslaughter if they have accidentally killed somebody with no malicious aforethought. In the history of sleepwalking murders, some defendants were excused, others charged with murder or manslaughter depending on the circumstances (Lyon). This

shows that current legal systems are capable of carefully considering the factors of responsibility regardless of the free will debate.

Legal systems will only be challenged or incompetent if it could be conclusively proven that human beings are entirely unresponsive to and unguided by reasons, and that mental states play absolutely no causal role in determining actions (Morse 253). With the nature of the readiness potentials and how they affect our actions largely remain unknown, Libet's findings alone are far from pointing us to such an aggressive conclusion.

D. Conclusion

To conclude, most of our decision-making processes still involve our conscious ego even if the decision might originate from unconscious activity. The presence of a preceding factor does not therefore create a universal loophole for us to shed our responsibilities. Considering how the absence of free will entails no positive agenda as to how we should live afterwards, it is perhaps best that we do not turn to this radical view before it is conclusively proven to be the case. Free will is the power and capacity that we possess, and in the exercise of our will we ought to hold ourselves responsible for our own actions.

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Teacher’s comment:

It remains an unsettling issue as to what we can conclude from Libet’s experiment and the like. Whether we suppose free will exist or not, apparent contradictions are reached (different ones for the two cases though). Yet Camille (SHU Ying Chi) manages to establish compelling reasons not to reject the notion of free will entirely. Furthermore, an elaborate discussion on moral and legal responsibility is given. The moral discussion surely is thought-provoking and it also enriches the discussion on the notion of free will. (LAI Chi Wai Kevin)