

Philosophy of Psychology

Week 10

- ⇒ Recap of last week
- ⇒ Dennett on free will and the Libet experiment
- ⇒ Team exercise
- ⇒ Exam results

Recap

Free will

- ⇒ Do we have free will?
- ⇒ Two key questions:
 - What is free will?
 - What almost everyone agrees on: free will is a precondition of moral responsibility (one can only be praised or blamed for an action if it was performed freely).
 - For most purposes, free will can be equated with the potential for moral responsibility. An action is free if and only if one could be praised or blamed for it (depending on whether it is good or bad).
 - Does determinism imply there is no free will (or moral responsibility)?

Determinism

- ⇒ Physical determinism: all physical events are lawfully determined by prior physical events.
- ⇒ General determinism: all events are lawfully determined by prior events.
 - In this course, “determinism” (unqualified) will be used to mean general determinism.

Main positions on free will and determinism

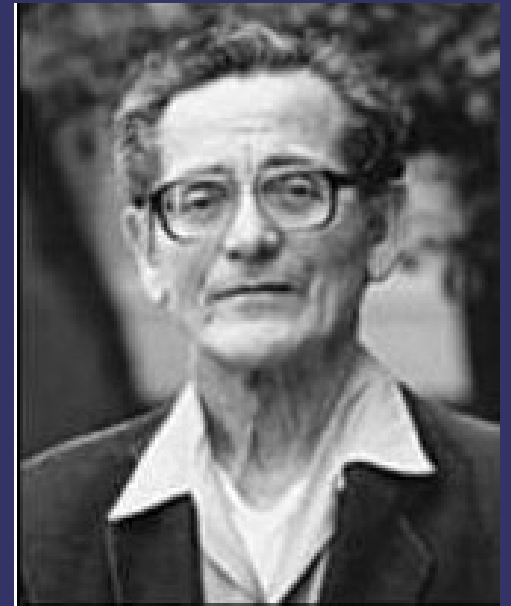
- ➔ Rows: Is determinism true?
- ➔ Columns: is determinism compatible with free will?

	Yes	No
Yes	soft determinism (Dennett, Churchland)	hard determinism (Pereboom)
No	?	libertarianism (Libet)

(Compatibilism) (Incompatibilism)

The Libet experiment (Again)

- ➔ Libet is an incompatibilist.
- ➔ For him, the question of free will boils down to the question of whether determinism is true.
- ➔ His experiment was designed to shed light on this matter.

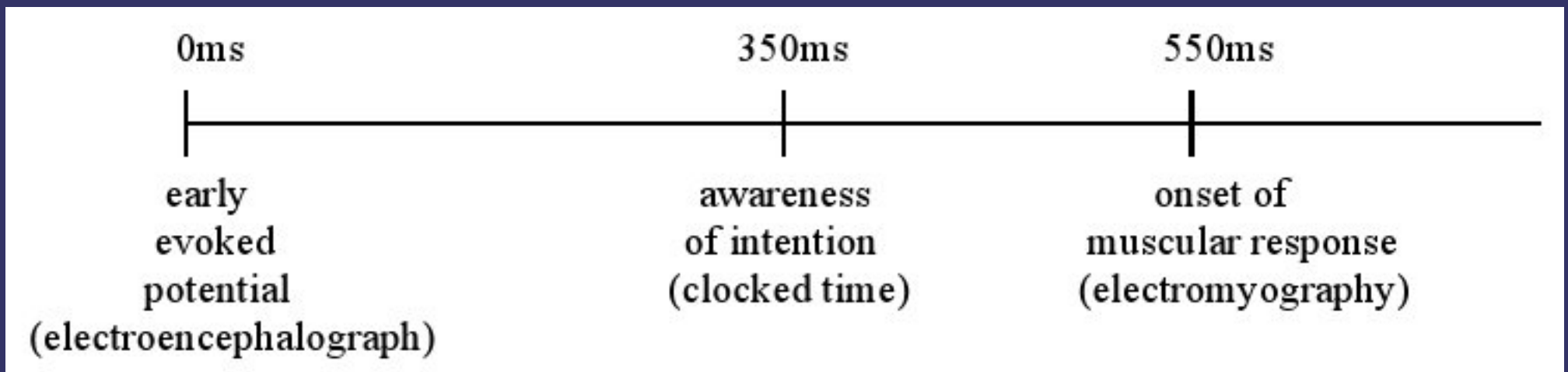


The experiment

- ⇒ Subjects were asked to move their hand when they feel like it. There is no time pressure.
- ⇒ Three measurements:
 - The readiness potential associated with the hand movement
 - Timing of “first awareness of wish to act”, as reported by the subject using a specially designed clock
 - Timing of beginning of movement.

Results

- ➔ RP was found to occur about 350ms before any (reported) awareness of volition.
- ➔ Awareness of volition occurs about 200ms before onset of movement.



End of recap

Criticism

- ➔ Determinism does not leave room for vetoes.
- ➔ It also renders the experiment irrelevant, as we knew already that we would find something like readiness potentials preceding decisions.

Libet on determinism

- ⇒ Determinism is a mere belief
 - Libet argues that, even though determinism seems true of processes in which the mind does not intervene, we know relatively little about the processes where it does. The brain is too messy for us to be able to tell easily whether it is deterministic.

Libet on determinism

- ⇒ Two ways the brain could be indeterministic:
 - In subtle ways which are lost in the “noise” of random quantum fluctuations.
 - In not-so-subtle ways which are hard to detect in practice.
- ⇒ We could add: in not-so-subtle ways which happen not to have been detected so far.

Objection

- ⇒ The reason why the brain is thought to be deterministic is because it is made of the same kinds of particles as the rest of the universe, and laws govern those.
- ⇒ Indeterminism would require *exceptions* to those laws.
 - It would require that electrons, say, follow different laws inside and outside the brain.

Libet on determinism

- ➔ Libet also appeals to dualism to bolster his case. He mentions an ancestor of Jackson's knowledge argument due to Leibniz.
- ➔ What is the connection?
 1. If dualism is true and physical determinism is true, epiphenomenalism is true.
 2. Epiphenomenalism is false.
 3. Dualism is true.
 4. So physical determinism is false (and probably general determinism as well).

Dennett on Libet

- ⇒ Dennett makes three main points:
 - Materialism and determinism are compatible with the existence of free will.
 - Libet's experiment only seems to establish his main claims if we assume a “Cartesian theatre”.
 - There is no Cartesian theatre.



Dennett on compatibilism

- ➔ Dennett is a materialist who believes in determinism, and has often been accused of denying the existence of consciousness and free will.
- ➔ He responds that he thinks both exist, but they are not exactly what one might have thought they were if one is a dualist.
- ➔ What are they? We learn a bit more later in the article. The important is that free will is supposed to be compatible with materialism and determinism.

Dennett on Cupid

- ➔ Dennett compares someone who thinks materialism and determinism are incompatible with free will with someone who thinks the existence of love depends on the existence of Cupid, the mythic character who makes people fall in love by hitting them with heart-tipped arrows.
- ➔ What's the point?

Dennett on Cupid

- ⇒ The point *seems* to be this:
 - What matters about free will is not what it is made of, or where it comes from, but what it does for us. What matters is its *role* for us.
 - Even if we once thought the role of the will was played by a soul, we can now agree it is played by brain processes.
 - Therefore, materialism and determinism are compatible with free will.
- ⇒ Criticism: maybe the role of free will is to be *free* in a strong sense incompatible with determinism?

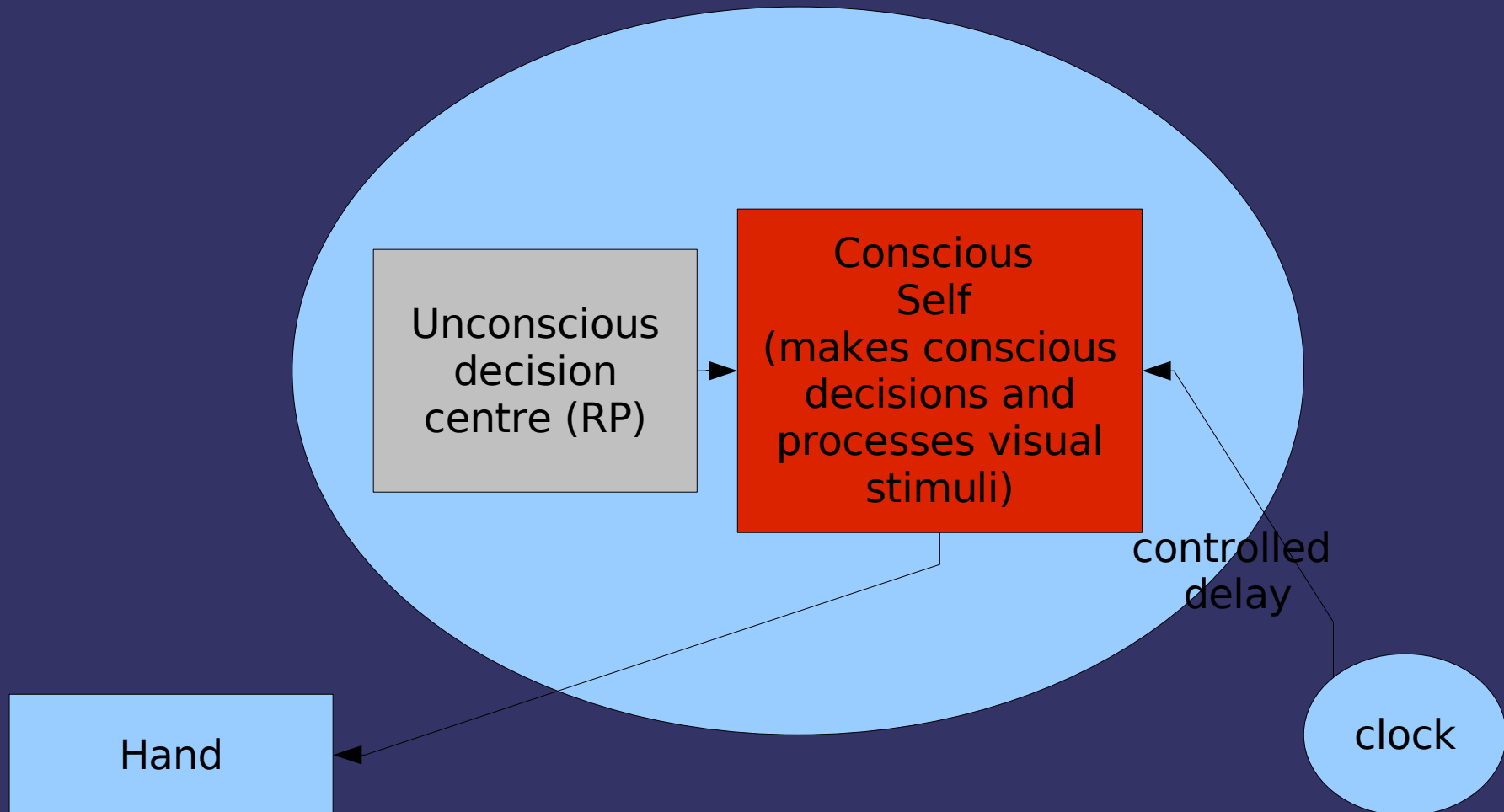
Libet's reasoning

1. The subjects are asked to compare the timing of two states:
 - Their conscious decision to act
 - Their conscious visual experiences of the states of the clock
2. Because both are conscious, they should be instantly accessible to the conscious subject. The subject should know perfectly when they co-occur.
3. So subjects should reliably report the timing of their conscious decisions
 - Notwithstanding a negative bias found when timing external stimuli.

Dennett's first objection

- ➔ Dennett's first objection is that the fact that the states compared are conscious doesn't imply simultaneity judgements between them are reliable. (he rejects claim 2)

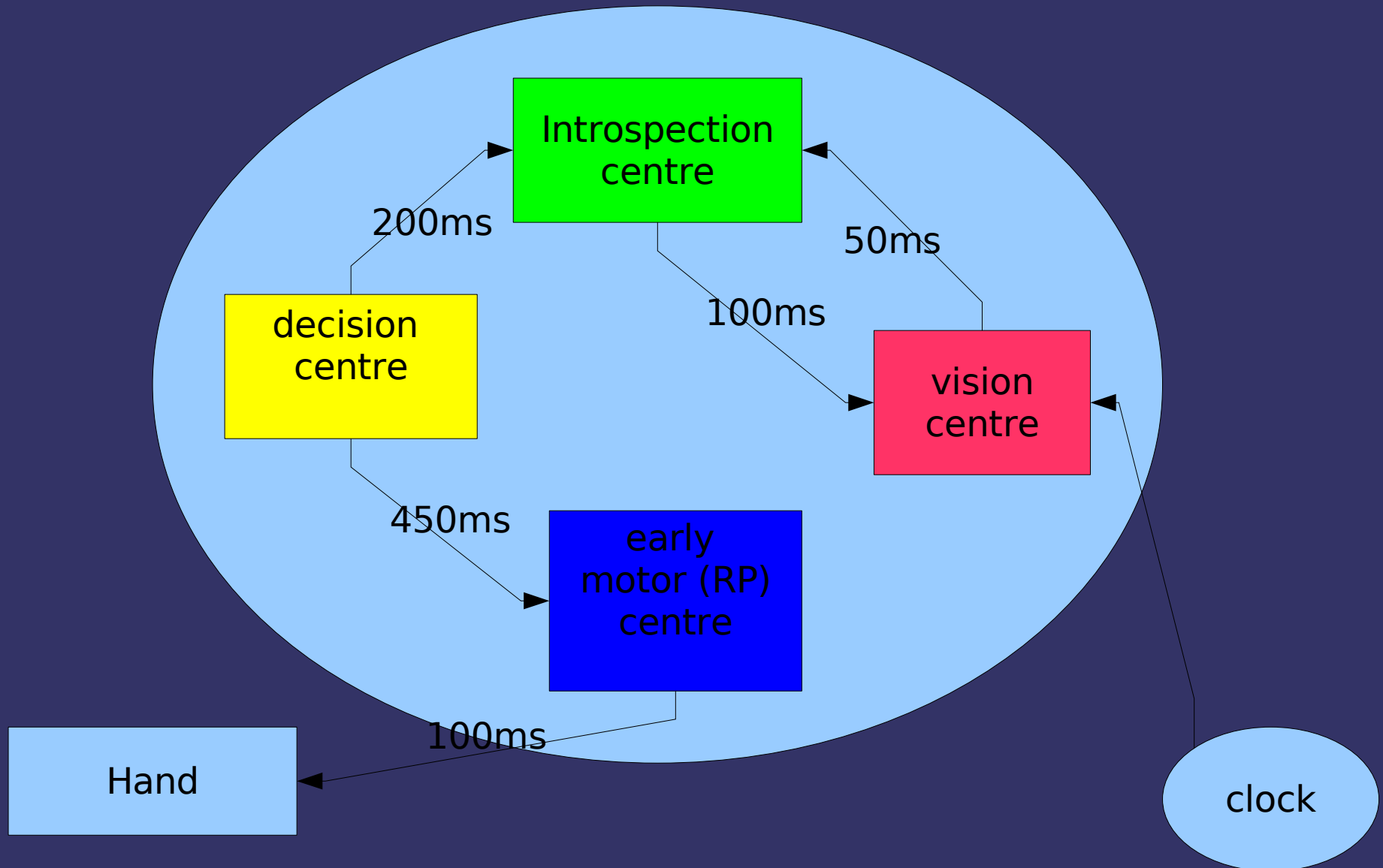
Libet's picture



Dennett's first objection

- ➔ Dennett points out that there are many other ways subjects' judgements could be arrived at, even if they are about the timing of conscious states.

A Dennettian scenario



Dennett's first objection

- ⇒ Scenarios like this, according to Dennett, are at least as plausible as Libet's.
- ⇒ In fact, he suggests they are more likely, because Libet's view appears to imply a “Cartesian theatre” where all conscious states are accessible at once.
 - Where would this theatre be in the brain?
 - There is no such thing according to Dennett.

Criticism

- ⇒ Why can't there be a Cartesian theatre in the brain?
 - Dennett does not provide any reason to think there is no Cartesian theatre.
 - However, he does elsewhere. (in *Consciousness Explained*)

Dennett's second objection

- ➔ Another objection Dennett gestures toward is that Libet is misguided in asking whether *conscious* decisions are the source of action.
- ➔ To be free, Dennett suggests, is for our decisions to be made by us in a suitable way, not for our decisions to be *conscious*.

Dennett's second objection

- ➔ So Dennett thinks Libet's research is misguided because, even if conscious decisions turned out to be inefficacious, this wouldn't show unconscious ones are not.
- One way Dennett makes this point is with the example of slow-building decisions. Most decisions take time, and we are not constantly conscious of the process involved in them.

Dennett's conception of the self

- ➔ According to Dennett, our (folk psychological) idea of the self is a vast simplification. Its origin and purpose is to help us reflect on our reasons and plans to best learn and communicate. It suits these purposes without providing an accurate view of what we really are.
- Dennett compares the folk psychological conception of the self to the desktop metaphor used by today's operating systems.

Dennett on the self

- ➔ Dennett's point seems to be that the self as depicted in folk psychology is something of a fiction, we should think about free will in terms of what the real self that includes all the main processes in the brain does.

Criticism

- ➔ Dennett might be talking past Libet: Libet is clearly concerned with “conscious will”, not just will in general. It is possible that Dennett's second objection (that there is will and freedom beyond consciousness) misses the point.

Team exercise

- ➔ Do you think that you would not be free if all your decisions were the product of unconscious processes in your brain? Explain.