

Philosophy of Psychology Week 9

- ⇒ Free will: the philosophical debate
- ⇒ Libet on free will
- ⇒ Test #2
 - The test will start at **12:45**.

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.
 - For any physical event e1, there is a prior physical event e0 such that, if e0 occurs, it follows by the laws of nature that e1 occurs.
 - Physical determinism asserts the **causal closure** of physical events.
 - Statistical physical determinism: all physical events occur with probabilities 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.

Relations between physical and general determinism

- ⇒ If general determinism is true, physical determinism is true.
- ⇒ If materialism and physical determinism are true, then general determinism is true.

Free will and determinism: a historical perspective

- ⇒ Determinism became plausible in the 17th and 18th century with the advent of Newtonian physics.
- ⇒ But it was widely taken to imply that freedom was an illusion, which was taken to threaten the foundations of morality.
 - The basic argument: when someone is coerced into doing something, they are not free and cannot be held morally responsible. Likewise, if we are “forced” to make the decisions we make by the laws of nature and prior events, we are not free or morally responsible.

A historical perspective

- ⇒ Because of its seeming implications, determinism was widely rejected.
- ⇒ Enter Hobbes, Hume, and Mill:
 - Freedom of the will is the power to do what one wills.
 - Determinism is compatible with one having the power to do what one wills.
 - Therefore, determinism is compatible with free will and moral responsibility.
- ⇒ Hobbes, Hume and Mill are called **compatibilists**. Their opponents are called **incompatibilists**.

The state of the debate

- ⇒ Today, almost everyone agrees that the simple view of free will endorsed by Hobbes, Hume and Mill is false.
- ⇒ However, determinism and materialism have become far more popular, and more sophisticated compatibilist views have been suggested.
- ⇒ These views still have their detractors.

Main positions on free will and determinism

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

	Yes	No
Yes	soft determinism <small>(Dennett, Churchland)</small>	hard determinism <small>(Pereboom)</small>
No	?	libertarianism <small>(Libet)</small> <small>(Incompatibilism)</small>

The relevance of psychology to determinism

- ⇒ Determinism is often assumed to be warranted by what we know about physics and chemistry.
- ⇒ But there is room for challenges to this line of argument. (See Libet in a moment)
- ⇒ Hence psychology and neuroscience can help shed light on whether determinism is true.
 - Psychology can provide deterministic cognitive models (in principle)
 - Neuroscience can provide deterministic neural models, or check for causal gaps in brain processes.
 - This is the kind of project Libet is engaged in.

The relevance of psychology to compatibilism

- ⇒ One of the problems with the Hobbesian view of free will is that it does not take into account factors such as mental disorder: if what one wills is altered due to a malfunction, it seems that one is to that extent not free.
- ⇒ Hence psychology can help refine our conception of free will by telling us more about mental disorder.
- ⇒ The same goes for other factors.
- ⇒ This is the project Churchland is engaged in.

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.



Readiness potentials

- ⇒ Readiness potentials are patterns of electric activity known to occur before voluntary actions.
- ⇒ Libet wanted to find out whether they occur before or after consciousness of volitions. If they occurred before (he thought), this would be a challenge for non-deterministic free will.

A reply?

- ⇒ Libet might say:
 1. volitions are conscious states
 2. so they can only occur when one is aware of having them
 3. so measuring when one is aware of having them is a good way of measuring when one has them.
- ⇒ Libet seems to use “conscious” to mean “state one is aware one is in”.

Unconscious volitions

- ⇒ Most of the time, we are not aware of our wishes and desires before acting on them. We act on desires and volitions we are not aware of at the time of acting.
- ⇒ So it's not true that all volitions are conscious in the sense of states we are aware of being in.
- ⇒ This leads to more problems: For all Libet's experiment shows, unconscious volitions could precede readiness potentials.

Also before RP ...

- ⇒ Libet does not talk about what conscious states *precede* RP. Could not the occurrence of RP itself be the product of a conscious decision to move one's wrist at some random time?

Room for vetoes?

- ⇒ If determinism is true, there is not even room for vetoes.
- ⇒ What does Libet have to say against determinism generally?

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 non-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 (hence general determinism as well).

Compatibilism to the rescue?

- ⇒ That RP precedes volitions, or even determines them, would be irrelevant to the question of free will if compatibilism was true (a possibility Libet hardly considers).