Review of: "Free Will Stands When Properly Explained and Correctly Defined and Neuroscience Shows This to Be the Case"

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If I were writing a referee report I would advise to accept as is. This is an exciting project, and even if I have some disagreements, on the whole I think it pushes the concept of *free will* in the right direction, and it is a bold direction.

My assessment diverges from other reviewers, so I want to make sure I have Knowles' view correct. The view bears some similarities with my own current project – developing an *ideal of freedom*, that is, a view of freedom that connects together a variety of concepts especially *free will*, *political liberty*, and *human flourishing* (cf. Pettit 2001). We agree on similar points, listed below, but whereas Knowles' project strikes me as incompatibilist – if I am allowed to use that distinction – mine is decidedly compatibilist and naturalist. In what follows, I explain and help defend the main tenets of Knowles' paper.

Knowles supports (at least) four conclusions, each of which is substantive, and each of which I also endorse. The four conclusions are:

1. We have a fundamental *freedom of choice* in that "we are always free to choose our conduct unless we are in chains" (16).
2. The *contemporary analysis* of 'free will' – really one of several analyses in terms of free action – comprises an "inadequate definition" (Knowles: 1).
3. Rather, we should think about "how a will is conditioned" (1).
4. Libet experiments "do not threaten 'free will' but vindicate it and demonstrate that … it is the agent's choice of action or inaction which assigns responsibility to an agent" (2).

Locke defends two theses that lend support to conclusion 1.

- The question "Is a will free?" makes no sense (Knowles: 1-2)
- "Freedom consists in the dependence of the existence, or not existence of any action, upon our volition of it" (Essay 2.21.27).

That the will is not free is really a semantic issue, according to Locke – the will is a power but so is freedom, and powers don't have powers. As Knowles puts the second point, freedom consists in "action or inaction," in our ability "to commence or not commence an action" (3). These two points are closely related.

The contemporary analysis claims that “free will” is elliptical for some kind of freedom of action – often *specific ability*, e.g., the ability to perform an action, or some alternative action, at a particular time (Campbell 2013). Contemporary philosophers might offer some other analysis, but this general approach of analyzing free will as freedom of action fails (Conclusion 2). Knowles wants to keep the will as a faculty distinct from the understanding but put it to better use. One might say Knowles thinks free will *does* make sense. Free will is a *secondary power*, a way in which the will is conditioned. The main point is Knowles offers a shift in focus to “how a will is conditioned, rather than is an agent’s will free” (Knowles: 2).

There are three different conceptions of *free will* at play. There is what I call *freedom of choice* where the choice is not between two contrary actions but between participation or resistance (Goyal and Campbell 2022) – “action or inaction,” the ability “to commence or not commence an action,” as Knowles says. This is a *basic*, *fundamental* power as indicated in conclusion 1. Nonetheless, we must keep in mind Martin Luther’s (1525) distinction between the powers of *choosing* and *discernment*. Desiderius Erasmus (1524) identifies free will with the former, but it is the latter that is important, Luther contends. Choice without discernment is more of a burden than a gift for it guarantees nothing other than being a slave to your desires. It is worth noting that Luther – who is a free will denier by contemporary lights – agrees with Erasmus and Knowles when it comes to freedom of choice. Directly after claiming “if God foreknew that Judas would be a traitor, Judas became a traitor of necessity,” Luther declares Judas “did what he did willingly, not by compulsion; for that willing of his was his own work; which God, by the motion of his Omnipotence, moved on into action, as he does everything else” (1525: 99).

This very point is noted by Locke (1689) and emphasized later by Jonathan Edwards (1754) and Thomas Hill Green (1879). The will is free by definition, as it were, for it is a power, and to have a power is to have freedom. As Luther warns, we also need a more robust notion of freedom, something that provides rational action, something aimed toward flourishing and well-being. Freedom is more than merely following our desires even if we only desire to live a simple life according to our own conception of the *good*. To speak in terms of *freedom of discernment*, though, is to continue along the lines of the contemporary analysis. Instead, Knowles offers a third conception to supplement freedom of choice: free will as *conditioned will*, freedom of choice constrained by understanding.

We can now appreciate Knowles’ criticism of Libet (1999) and the philosophers who draw false conclusions from Libet’s work. Libet, too, accepts that we have freedom of choice, and since that is the foundation of the other freedoms, the allowance of *free won’t* is a substantive concession. Libet admits that we have freedom of choice to follow our desired course of action or to resist. Is there space to deny either freedom of discernment or free will as conditioned will after this concession.

On the other hand, contemporary philosophers read Libet as drawing conclusions about specific abilities, particularly our decisions to act or not at some specific time. This is confused on a number of levels. Knowles project is important and that

generalizes to what philosophers have to offer to empirical debates. Scientists give arguments. Arguments use concepts. The concepts studied by philosophers have a history of complex misunderstandings requiring sophisticated discussion and analysis. Yes, Virginia, philosophers still have a role in the Academy.