

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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Dr Knowles has chosen a topic of great metaphysical importance and has offered an interesting method to solve the problem of whether or there is something like 'free will'.

She suggests that if the standard definition/s of free will is revised in the way she explains that, using this new definition of 'free will' in the Libet experiments the experiments would show that free will does, in fact, exist. She invokes both the large area of conceptual work done in philosophy on free will (spanning the Greeks 400 B.C. to modern philosophy in the form of Kant and Locke and later Wittgenstein) as well as the knowledge derived from scientific work on free will, i.e. the Libet experiments.

The idea of offering a new definition for science to use and therefore to come up with different empirical results shows an understanding of how empirical results can be altered by conceptual underpinnings. This idea is interesting and is, in my view, not used often enough in philosophical work. So, potentially a good strategy. Choosing this strategy gives the paper a particular epistemological feature; a comment on theory laden observation. Much of this theoretical work is assumed at the outset, which is not a problem in itself, as the paper is not in epistemology. But the difficulty of doing this type of work also creates some of the paper's most important weaknesses.

I tentatively venture what I take to be Dr Knowles's main points: 1. A "will" cannot sensibly be spoken about as "free", as the concept of "will" presupposes it being free (and this clarification should direct our investigations), 2. A "will" can only be sensibly spoken of in relation to rational choices made, and cannot be part of an account of any part of our decision making which has to do with urges or desires (this is why Libet's experiments don't show us anything).

What follows are some reasons why the good idea in this research paper needs quite a lot of further development to be able to argue as it sets out to do. The reasons have been divided into two categories. In both categories they have been included in no specific order of importance but also not in terms of sequence when reading the paper.

Content considerations:

1. Overall consideration: The problem of free will, many current scientific philosophers would say, is a problem for science to solve. Neuroscience or some such. This paper is philosophical. This is not a problem in my view, but what is a problem is that a promise is made in the title of the paper by mentioning neuroscience, yet the paper does nearly nothing to connect to neuroscientific research on 'free will'. The Libet experiments are not enough to satisfy this promise. The title would be improved by using Libet experiments instead of neuroscience.
2. Throughout, the use of the term "conditioned" when referring to "will" is extremely obscure, yet is central to what Dr Knowles is trying to do. Nowhere is an explanation of it offered. What does it mean to condition a will? Also,

considering that the paper claims to make contact with work in neuroscience, to condition a will must have some sort of empirically trackable feature. I tried to imagine many times what this could look like.

3. The citing of philosophers spanning 400 B.C. to the modern period to nearly current is not required for a paper such as this one. That type of analysis is what is needed for a historical analysis of the concept of free will, but not for a paper which hopes to offer a new definition for 'free will' which can be adopted and put to practical use in empirical contexts.
4. Wittgenstein's mention of free will is in relation to his qualms with metaphysics. Discussions about free will were pseudo topics for him as they could not be resolved by conceptual analysis. I think, the author takes his worry with 'free will' as support for her worry about 'free will' needing to be reformulated as a question only about 'will'. This is a category mistake and an incorrect reading of Wittgenstein.
5. The mention of Donaldson's causality and intentionality in relation to free will is a distraction from the central argument. As far as I can see, this paper is not about causality or intentionality. Nor does Donaldson's account explicitly assist in developing the new definition – which is Kantian.
6. Locke is of greater assistance as he delineates 'free' and 'will', just as the author wants. Locke associates the will with the agent and not with a property of being free, or not being free. Very useful. Except, in terms of the final outcome for the argument in this paper, Locke very much takes will to be somehow constrained, or determined, by base and physical desires and urges – a characterisation this paper is trying to avoid, I think. If this departure from Locke is correct, it should have been clearly discussed at the first mention of Locke.
7. One of the major problems which arises from a discussion of something like 'conditioned' will is that it moves the idea of 'will' back into something which has a property. And this is precisely what the author wants to get away from. So, a "conditioned will" has to be dealt with very carefully, if it is to avoid the same pitfalls as the property of being 'free', and thus survive the Libet experiments. This problem exists for the paper even if 'conditioned' had been clearly explicated. Why move away from "free will" to "conditioned will"? It seems just as troublesome.
8. Kant: There seems to be a misunderstanding about his distinction between two meanings of freedom. The author holds that Kant's negative meaning is the freedom not to act, and positive meaning is to be free of coercive influences, thus making it impossible to choose freely. But Kant actually means by his negative understanding to be able to act free of influence (what the author has as the positive meaning), and the positive meaning is the very thing which Kant is famous for: That we are free when *bound* to the rules of reason or rationality. *Bound* to. This is key. Not only is it key for Kant, but it should be a central theme to develop throughout this paper as it is, as far as I can see, the separation of reason from desires and/or urges which defines 'will' for the author. If a departure from Kant is intended this does not come across at all. It seems to me throughout the paper that the idea of doing as "one pleases" (mentioning drug addiction and dress buying etc as opposed to correct choices which are made freely) is relegated to being coerced by desires and urges. There is a lot in here, but it needs to be carefully and systematically worked into the argument.
9. Hume: Key to the quote from Hume is his use of "imagine". For Hume our imaginings of the world and ourselves are by no means epistemic tools to know what we or the world are like. The quote chosen is an epistemological point, not a point about free will. I think the choice of Hume's quote is slightly off point.
10. This is a broader comment: Throughout the paper the use of conceptual analysis is prominent. As expected. But the pitfall of doing conceptual analysis for trying to solve an ontological problem about whether or not there is such a thing

as free will, or will, is that no amount of analysis is going to yield a decisive answer. Unless the concept is inserted into an experiment, as suggested. The marriage of conceptual work with empirical work is a difficult undertaking with many rules guiding it. For this reason, the author should be careful of using phrases such as “...but would not such tests be *absurd*, and how would they be conducted...”. The word “absurd” refers to logical absurdity. But in the ambit of a paper such as this one – empirical testing for freedom of will is exactly what we are after. So, it might be a logical absurdity, but it cannot be an empirical absurdity. It could be empirically impossible to test for something like “free will”.

11. The pitting of Kant's ‘free’ against Libet's free is very tricky. Yet, it is crucial to the success of the argument.

Carrington's dress cannot do all the work here. In some sense, for this paper to reach its full potential, the Libet experiments have to be undertaken again, but in reality not simply in the imagination of the author. The new definition should be demonstrated to work as promised. The tests have to be empirically executed and the outcomes have to be the sort of outcomes neuroscience yields. Other neuroscientists should be able to repeat the experiments and use the outcomes to build further empirical work on. This would move the paper into the category it needs to be, and promises to be.

12. Lastly, it is advisable that a paper such as this one perhaps uses more current naturalist type of philosophers (Dennett, Devitt, Sterelny, Clarke on ‘free will’). After all, they claim, they already work closely with neuroscience. At least their attempts should be dealt with, even if rejected with reasons.

Stylistic considerations:

1. Most citations lack references.
2. The section headings are not helpful. They do not sign post the real work that is meant to be done in that section. For instance, some possibilities ‘A philosophical background’, ‘Reason makes us free’, ‘The new definition applied’.
3. The argument could have been more systematically developed (explicit use of premises and sub conclusions and so on) instead of adopting the more Socratic method that it does. I found the discussion, the to and fro between philosophers and divergent periods, somewhat confusing.
4. It was not always obvious why certain theorists or concepts were discussed at all. Such as the elaboration on the distinction ‘desires’ and ‘urges’. They could be lumped together as ‘impulses’ for instance, since it is more the distinction between ‘reason’ and ‘impulses’ which is central to this argument.
5. Since much of the argument is based on sophisticated hierarchies of supervenience (will supervenes on action/choices, or impulses supervene on will/mind, or reason supervenes on will) it would help to use diagrams to make this easier to remember while reading.
6. The very fluid movement from metaphorical mentions of “imprisonment”, “chains” and “power” and the hope to connect this to scientific outcomes is not realistic. What is the language the author wants to and needs to adopt to achieve their aim? What should be the preferred lexicon of the paper? If the outcome is hoped to be more empirical, perhaps the use of Locke, Hume and Aristotle's very metaphorical elucidations should be avoided or at least carefully translated (a mammoth task, in itself).

I think the paper has great potential as an idea. It needs and deserves much more work to succeed in its aims. I hope Dr Knowles continues with this.

