

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

Stephen Leach¹

¹ Keele University

Potential competing interests: The author(s) declared that no potential competing interests exist.

I have three criticisms of this paper.

1. The author has not quite got to the bottom of Locke's position on free will. The author suggests that Locke believes that we are always free unless we are physically constrained. That is not the case. In Locke's example of the locked room:

[S]uppose a Man be carried, whilst asleep, into a Room, where is a Person he longs to see and speak with; and be there locked fast in, beyond his Power to get out: he awakes and is glad to find himself in so desirable Company, which he stays willingly in, *i.e.* prefers his stay to going away. I ask, Is not this stay voluntary? I think, no Body will doubt it . . . (Locke, 1695, §10)

Locke point is that the man in the locked room acts *both under necessity and voluntarily*. He believes that "*Voluntary . . . is not opposed to Necessary; but to Involuntary*" (Locke 1695, §11). Locke argues that it is the misunderstanding of this point that leads to our endless confusion over the problems of free will.

2. The argument of the penultimate paragraph is invalid. Here is the paragraph in question:

"Furthermore, correctly defined free will could answer questions about moral judgments and show that free will is more than folk psychology and merely a convenient explanation of our intuition that we are free to choose our actions as Dennett argues. Consider the recently instituted Covid vaccine mandates requiring employees to either get vaccinated or lose their jobs – would philosophers, psychologists, neuroscientists, etc., identify the people who accepted the vaccines as exercising free will, or the people who refused the vaccines? Nozick could hardly argue that one group acted under more significant threat or duress than the other, given that the same mandate and the same threat of losing one's job applied to both groups. But if one were to apply the free will definition I propose, then both groups chose their actions freely and both groups acted voluntarily. However, the group which accepted the vaccines allowed their wills to be conditioned by fear and formed volitions driven by fear, while the group which chose not to accept the vaccines allowed their wills to be conditioned by freedom and formed volitions driven by rational considerations rather than fear."

In other words:

1. I am told of a new rule

2. I am told of the penalty for breaking that rule

3. I obey the rule

Conclusion: I obey the rule because of fear of the penalty. – But the conclusion does not follow.

3. There is a mismatch between the abstract and the conclusion. The author tells us that she will argue that, if properly defined, “free will is possible” but her final conclusion runs as follows:

“In the end, the question free will presents us with is not whether it is possible, but what conditions our wills and who decides how our wills are conditioned. And if the answer is always us and the choice itself is unconditioned, unimpeded, and always possible, then Locke and Hume are correct to argue that we are always free to choose our conduct unless we are in chains. And so is Kant when he argues that morality, and ultimately responsibility, is inextricably linked with freedom and our conception of it for so long as we are rational and free to act or not act, we can choose our actions and therefore, how our wills are conditioned – by freedom or impulses and inclinations. Such freedom confers responsibility on us for every action we choose to perform, and mitigating circumstances are only relevant for the assignment of praise or blame, reward or punishment, etc. But when it comes to our decisions to act or not and the consequences of such decisions, they are ours and ours alone.”

The problem is that, as everything hinges on the word ‘if’ in the second line, the author has not demonstrated that “freedom is possible.”

To conclude on a more positive note, the focus on Libet’s explicit definition of free will – and relating that to the philosophical debate on free will – is an interesting and worthwhile exercise.