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Experimental philosophy of actual and counterfactual free will intuitions



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ABSTRACT

Five experiments suggested that everyday free will and moral responsibility judgments about some hypothetical thought examples differed from free will and moral responsibility judgments about the actual world. Experiment 1 ($N = 106$) showed that free will intuitions about the actual world measured by the FAD-Plus poorly predicted free will intuitions about a hypothetical person performing a determined action ($r = .13$). Experiments 2–5 replicated this result and found the relations between actual free will judgments and free will judgments about hypothetical determined or fated actions ($r_s = .22-.35$) were much smaller than the differences between them ($\eta_p^2 = .2-.55$). These results put some pressure on theoretical accounts of everyday intuitions about freedom and moral responsibility.

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1. Introduction

Many theorists hold that at least a minimal belief in free will is required for us to have healthy relationships with others and ourselves. Belief in free will may be necessary for autonomy, creativity, desert, reactive attitudes, dignity, love, and friendship (Kane, 1996). Recent advances in psychology and neuroscience may pose some threats to a belief in free will (but see Mele (2006)). This research suggests that many people appear to have relatively less relevant control over their behavior than they may think (Bargh & Ferguson, 2000; Libet, 1985; Wegner, 2002; Wegner & Bargh, 1998; Wegner & Wheatley, 1999). Some worry that if some results from neuroscience were to become widely assimilated, then a belief in free will would be diminished and the desirable behaviors associated with a belief in free will would also disappear or be dramatically reduced. For example, in the absence of belief in free will, we may have difficulty maintaining meaningful relationships with others and interpersonal conflicts may become more common (Kane, 1996). Empirical research supports these worries to some extent suggesting that beliefs in free will are linked to judgments about punishment (Carey & Paulhus, 2013; Rakos, Laurene, Skala, & Slane, 2008). Moreover, belief in free will has been argued to be an important factor for many commonly desirable behaviors such as refraining from cheating, self-control, and job performance (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009; Baumeister, Sparks, Stillman, & Vohs, 2008; Stillman, Baumeister, & Mele, 2011; Vohs & Schooler, 2008). For reasons such as these, some take it that belief in free will is so important and engrained that if we were to find out that people really are not free or morally responsible, we should leave people to their mistaken beliefs (Smilansky, 2002).

But what are people's attitudes and beliefs about freedom and moral responsibility? Some theorists have extensively relied on hypothetical thought examples to explore people's judgments about freedom and moral responsibility (Cova,

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Bertoux, Bourgeois-Gironde, & Dubois, 2012; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2004; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2005, 2006; Nichols & Knobe, 2007; Sarkissian et al., 2010; Weigel, 2013).¹ These thought examples often stipulate a number of conditions and then probe participants' intuitions under those conditions. Other theorists have largely focused on free will and moral responsibility judgments about the actual world (Carey & Paulhus, 2013; Paulhus & Carey, 2011; Rakos et al., 2008; Stroessner & Green, 1990; Viney, Waldman, & Barchilon, 1982). One worry is that many people may make similar judgments about the actual world and a hypothetical world with stipulated conditions. If everyday intuitions about actual cases do not diverge much from intuitions about hypothetical cases, then the interest in folk intuitions about hypothetical cases may be diminished. If folk intuitions about actual cases diverge from hypothetical cases, then understanding the extent of that divergence is important to have a complete and accurate understanding of folk theories, concepts, and intuitions about freedom and moral responsibility.

Five experiments estimated the difference between actual and counterfactual free will judgments. Results suggest that overall, free will and moral responsibility intuitions about the actual world can be different than free will and moral responsibility intuitions about some hypothetical worlds. First, people's actual intuitions were weak predictors of their hypothetical intuitions. Second, the amount of the variance explained by the relation between hypothetical and actual intuitions is substantially smaller than the variance accounted for by the difference between the two. These results suggest that actual and hypothetical judgments are not only conceptually different, they are empirically different at least for some people in some instances. Consequently, only exploring one of actual or hypothetical intuitions is not sufficient to have an accurate picture of folk intuitions about freedom and moral responsibility.

2. Counterfactual and actual intuitions about free will and moral responsibility

Can one be free and morally responsible if determinism is true?² There are two prominent answers to this Compatibility Question. Compatibilists hold that free will and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism. One could be free and morally responsible if one's conscious mental states (e.g., beliefs, desires, intentions, and plans) are involved in the right way in the production of an action (along with appropriate background conditions). Those mental states are among the items that make a person a unique individual (Frankfurt, 1971). If those mental states had been different (i.e., if the person had been different), then a different action could have come about even if determinism is true. Determinism does not rule out this kind of freedom and moral responsibility because those mental states are just another link in the causal chain that leads to the action. Incompatibilists do not think that freedom and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism. Some incompatibilists argue that we cannot be morally responsible for anything that is the complete consequence of things for which we are not morally responsible. If determinism is true, our actions are the results of events and laws of nature we are not responsible for (e.g., events and laws that existed before we were born). Therefore, we cannot be morally responsible for our actions (Strawson, 1994).

Another threat to freedom and moral responsibility is fatalism. Fatalism is the view that "whatever happens must happen" (Bernstein, 2002, p. 65). Fatalism rules out some compatibilist styles of freedom and moral responsibility (Nahmias & Murray, 2010). If an action is fated, then the action must be performed regardless of the past and the laws of nature. There is nothing that the person could have done not to bring about that action. The person's mental states are in this sense irrelevant to the production of the action. If the person had different mental states, then the same fated action would have come about. But the possible differences in one's mental states are precisely the grounds that some compatibilists think can allow for freedom and moral responsibility. If the person's mental states are irrelevant to the production of the action, then compatibilist style freedom and moral responsibility is ruled out.

Arguments about determinism's relation to free will and moral responsibility are often complicated and nuanced. It is widely agreed that one important piece of evidence for evaluating those arguments is people's pre-theoretical intuitions about freedom and moral responsibility (Sommers, 2010, 2012). Unlike some philosophical pursuits (e.g., logic), philosophers of free will have largely taken themselves to be exploring everyday conceptions of freedom and moral responsibility. Views that do not take into account everyday intuitions about freedom and moral responsibility run the risk of simply being irrelevant to the human concepts and practices that have traditionally preoccupied the philosophical study of free will (Nahmias & Murray, 2010). To put it another way, without being constrained by ordinary thinking about freedom and moral responsibility, philosophers run the risk of theorizing about "philosophical fictions" (Mele, 2001).

Understanding everyday intuitions about freedom and moral responsibility is largely an empirical enterprise.³ Unfortunately, there can be some confusion as there are different targets of everyday intuitions about freedom and moral responsibility. One appropriate target of experimental investigating is people's intuitions about freedom and moral responsibility about the actual world. Call these *actual intuitions*. For example, are people actually free and morally responsible? Is determinism or fatalism actually true? A conceptually distinct set of intuitions that is also an appropriate target for investigation is people's intuitions about hypothetical scenarios with stipulated conditions. Call intuitions about these types of hypothetical situations *counterfactual intuitions*. For example, can a person be free and morally responsible if determinism or fatalism were

¹ Some hold that there is a difference between intuitions and judgments (see Feltz and Bishop (2010) for a review). For the purposes of this paper, there is no relevant difference.

² Determinism is the thesis that "at any instant exactly one future is compatible with the state of the universe and the laws of nature" (Mele, 2006, p. 3).

³ Empirically exploring philosophical issues has been called Experimental Philosophy. See Feltz (2009) for a review.

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