



Review

Moral responsibility and free will: A meta-analysis



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 November 2013

Keywords:

Free will  
Moral responsibility  
Intuitions  
Meta-analysis  
Determinism  
Affect

ABSTRACT

Fundamental beliefs about free will and moral responsibility are often thought to shape our ability to have healthy relationships with others and ourselves. Emotional reactions have also been shown to have an important and pervasive impact on judgments and behaviors. Recent research suggests that emotional reactions play a prominent role in judgments about free will, influencing judgments about determinism's relation to free will and moral responsibility. However, the extent to which affect influences these judgments is unclear. We conducted a meta-analysis to estimate the impact of affect. Our meta-analysis indicates that beliefs in free will are largely robust to emotional reactions.

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## 1. Introduction

Many philosophers and psychologists hold that at least a minimal belief in free will is required for us to have healthy relationships with others and ourselves. Free will may be necessary for autonomy, creativity, desert, reactive attitudes, dignity, love, and friendship (Kane, 1996). However, recent advances in psychology and neuroscience may pose some threats to a belief in free will. This research suggests that many people appear to be unaware of some of the neurological antecedents of their behavior (Bargh & Ferguson, 2000; Libet, 1985; Wegner, 2002; Wegner & Bargh, 1998; Wegner & Wheatley, 1999). One worry is that if these results 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, 2007; Stillman et al., 2010; Vohs & Schooler, 2008) and has been shown to influence some of the neurological antecedents of behavior mentioned above (Rigoni, Kuehn, Sartori, & Brass, 2011). For these reasons, 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). To disabuse people of their mistaken belief would create a world where nobody has any of these things.

However, the extent to which advances in neuroscience and psychology call free will into question or impact everyday conceptions of free will is still an open question (Mele, 2006; Mele, 2013; Roskies, 2006). Belief in free will may be so engrained that it will be incredibly hard to dislodge even in the face of extraordinary threats (Feltz, 2013; Feltz & Millan, *in press*). For example, it appears as if many of the troubling findings from neuroscience have already been assimilated in portions of the population. But this assimilation has not led to a reduction in beliefs in the dualistic nature of humans or free will (O'Connor and Joffe, 2013). Thus, one possibility is simply that our ordinary understanding of free will is such that it can easily accommodate the findings of neuroscience, rather than being at odds with them.

Indeed, why should people be worried by the findings of neuroscience? One answer is that they seem to promote a deterministic view of human behavior. Determinism has been traditionally considered as a threat to human freedom and moral responsibility. Determinism is the thesis that whatever happens, including human behavior, is entirely caused by previous events and the laws of nature (Mele, 2006). It means that whenever one acts, that action is completely the product of the laws of nature and events that took place earlier in one's life, and those events are in turn completely the product of earlier events, eventually reaching events that happened long before the person who acted was born. However, it is not clear that determinism prevents free will and moral responsibility, and philosophers have divergent opinions on that matter. *Compatibilists* hold that free will and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism. *Incompatibilists* hold that if determinism is true, then we cannot have free will or be morally responsible for our actions. Thus, if people hold a compatibilist view of free will, it could be that recent findings of neurosciences do not threaten at all their view of themselves as free and morally responsible agents.

In the past years, theorists have increasingly made use of empirical methods to study laypeople's conceptions and intuitions about free will and moral responsibility with findings that may appear somewhat contradictory. Sometimes people seem to have compatibilist intuitions and sometimes they appear to have incompatibilist intuitions.<sup>1</sup> For example, when participants are asked the abstract question if somebody can be free and morally responsible in a deterministic world, most people respond 'no'. However, if participants are asked if a concretely described person (e.g., John murdered his wife and children so he could be with his lover) can be free and morally responsible in a deterministic world, most people respond 'yes'. To resolve this apparent contradiction, some theorists have proposed that people's fundamental judgments about free will and moral responsibility tend to be influenced by negative emotional reactions (Nichols & Knobe, 2007). In this paper, we survey the results of 30 published and unpublished studies and submit them to a meta-analysis in order to estimate the extent to which purported negative emotional reactions influence judgments about the freedom and moral responsibility of agents living in a deterministic universe. We conclude that negative emotional reactions have some impact on judgments about free will and moral responsibility, but this effect is not large enough to play the theoretical role theorists have attributed to it.

### 1.1. Free will and affective reactions

Existing research concerning intuitions about determinism's relation to free will and moral responsibility can be divided into two broad categories.<sup>2</sup> A few works investigate intuitions about particular claims or cases that help inform whether free will and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism (e.g., the Principle of Alternative Possibilities or manipulation cases) (Cova, 2014b; Feltz, 2013; Miller & Feltz, 2011; Sripada, 2012). However, the majority of existing studies try to determine directly whether laypeople's conceptions of free will and moral responsibility are *prima facie* compatible with determinism.

<sup>1</sup> 'Intuition' is a term of art (see Feltz & Bishop, 2010). Here, we consider the 'intuition that *p*' as an immediate judgment that *p*.

<sup>2</sup> Work using the empirical methods of the behavioral sciences to explore philosophically relevant beliefs sometimes is called "experimental philosophy." For an overview of experimental philosophy, see Feltz (2009); Cova (2011a, 2011b) and Knobe and Nichols (2008).

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