



Bringing free will down to Earth: People's psychological concept of free will and its role in moral judgment



Andrew E. Monroe^{a,*}, Kyle D. Dillon^b, Bertram F. Malle^c

^a Florida State University, USA

^b Harvard University, USA

^c Brown University, USA

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ABSTRACT

Belief in free will is widespread, and this belief is supposed to undergird moral and legal judgment. Despite the importance of the free will concept, however, there remains widespread confusion regarding its definition and its connection to blame. We address this confusion by testing two prominent models of the folk concept of free will—a metaphysical model, in which free will involves a soul as an uncaused “first mover,” and a psychological model, in which free will involves choice, alignment with desires, and lack of constraints. We test the predictions of these two models by creating agents that vary in their capacity for choice and the presence of a soul. In two studies, people's judgments of free will and blame for these agents show little to no basis in ascriptions of a soul but are powerfully predicted by ascriptions of choice capacity. These results support a psychological model of the folk concept of free will.

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1. Introduction

Ask people on the street if they have free will, and most will affirm they do. Beliefs about free will have a profound impact on social life, influencing moral judgment (Nichols, 2011), legal responsibility (Greene & Cohen, 2004; Krueger, Hoffman, Walter, & Grafman, 2013), job performance (Stillman et al., 2010), cheating behavior (Vohs & Schooler, 2008), aggression and helping (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009), and even premotor neural activation (Rigoni, Kühn, Gaudino, Sartori, & Brass, 2012).

The study of free will—specifically, the study of people's belief in free will—has garnered widespread attention over the past decade. Yet for such an important concept, there remains widespread disagreement over the definition of free will (e.g., Nichols, 2011; Wegner, 2002) and over its relationship with such important facets of social life as morality (e.g., Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2005; Nichols & Knobe, 2007). We therefore set out to untangle the definitional confusion over the folk concept of free will and assess the exact link between free will and moral blame. In particular, we compare two possible models of people's concept of free will and its relation to morality and provide two experiments that test the validity of these two models.

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, Florida State University, 1107 West Call Street, Tallahassee, FL 32036, USA.
E-mail address: Monroe@psy.fsu.edu (A.E. Monroe).

1.1. Two views of people's concept of free will

One prominent model of how ordinary people conceptualize free will argues that people are committed to substance dualism (Bloom, 2007), which entails (among other things) the concept of a soul as a “first mover” or “uncaused cause” for free will. People's concept of free will “is the idea that we make choices and have thoughts independent of anything remotely resembling a physical process” (Montague, 2008, p. R584), “laden with the concept of a soul, a non-physical, unfettered, internal source of choice-making” (Bargh & Earp, 2009, p. 13). On this view, people conceptualize human free will and agency as distinct from other types of physical systems.

For example, one study by Nichols (2004) asked groups of children and adults to reason about whether two types of events “had to happen.” One was a physical event: a pot of water heating over a flame. The other was a choice event: a woman choosing to have vanilla ice cream. For both the physical and the choice events, Nichols asked his participants: “If everything in the world was the same right up until she chose vanilla [the water boiled], did Joan have to choose vanilla [did the water have to boil]?” (2004, p. 487). Participants were much more likely to agree that the water had to boil than to agree that the agent had to choose the vanilla ice cream.

Nichols (2004) took these data as evidence that people are committed to an indeterministic conception of human free will; however, others have gone farther to suggest people's folk concept of free will is inherently dualistic. “Common sense tells us that we exist outside of the material world—we are connected to our bodies and our brains, but we are not ourselves material beings, and so we can act in ways that are exempt from physical law” (Bloom, 2012, p. 1). This view that people's concept of free will is inextricably bound to concerns about indeterminism on the one side and requiring a soul as an “uncaused causer” on the other side is further buttressed by research showing that metaphysical considerations, such as highlighting the presence of a deterministic universe, which some take to be at odds with the folk view, can alter people's willingness to attribute free will and blame to agents (See Knobe, 2014; Nichols & Knobe, 2007; Roskies & Nichols, 2008).

While the characterization of people's folk concept of free will as metaphysical dualism has largely held sway in scholarly and popular circles (e.g., Bargh, 2008; Bargh & Earp, 2009; Bayer, Ferguson, & Gollwitzer, 2003; Bloom, 2007, 2012; Cashmore, 2010; Chisholm, 1966; Montague, 2008), some writers have recently noted that ordinary people's concept may actually resemble compatibilist theories of free will (Kane, 2011; Mele, 2014; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2006; Nahmias et al., 2005; Woolfolk, Doris, & Darley, 2006). So what is the folk concept of free will?

Monroe and Malle (2010) recently offered an empirically based model of the folk concept of free will. According to their model, people have a psychologically tractable concept of free will that is defined in terms of choice, alignment with one's desires, and freedom from constraints. Further, in contrast to the metaphysical characterization of people's concept of free will, concerns about souls, uncaused causes, and determinism are inconsequential for this psychological concept of free will.

In a first study on the topic, Monroe and Malle (2010) probed people's concept of free will by inviting them to report “what you think it means to have free will” (p. 214). This approach mirrored Malle and Knobe's (1997) research, which successfully demonstrated that the criteria for a folk concept such as intentionality could be elicited by directly asking people about the concept (e.g., “When you say that somebody performed an action intentionally, what does this mean?” p. 106). Supporting the psychological model of free will, the convergent meaning of free will was the ability to make a choice in line with one's desires, and free of constraints. Notably, not a single person mentioned the involvement of a soul or indeterminism.

In a congruous analysis of free will, Stillman, Baumeister, and Mele (2011) asked participants to produce an autobiographical account of actions they felt were either “of their own free will” or “not the result of free will.” Participants in the “free will” condition reported behaviors associated with pursuing desired goals, making choices, and acting against external forces (e.g., temptation or pressure from others), whereas participants in the “no free will” condition wrote about behaviors in the presence of powerful authority figures. Together these studies present an emerging picture of a lay view of free will that is psychological—defined by choice, alignment with desires, and freedom from constraints.

1.2. Free will and morality

For many scholars, questions concerning free will carry great import because free will is assumed to undergird everyday morality. This assumption is typically interpreted to imply that if an agent did not act of her own free will, then it is inappropriate to blame or punish her. Darwin put the sentiment succinctly, arguing that without a belief in free will “one deserves no credit for anything. . . nor ought one to blame others” (Darwin, 1840, p. 27). Neither of the two major models of people's folk concept of free will disputes the importance of free will for morality. However, the metaphysical and psychological models of people's concept of free will differ sharply regarding the criteria that are necessary for agents to have free will, and therefore to be morally responsible for their actions. The metaphysical model argues that for an agent to have free will and to be morally blameworthy, (1) the agent must have a soul; and (2) in virtue of having a soul the agent is able to uniquely intervene on the world, free of deterministic causes (i.e., the soul represents a “first mover” or “uncaused cause”). The psychological model, by contrast, proposes that free will and moral blame require that (1) an agent has the capacity for choice and intentional action; and (2) the agent is (reasonably) free from constraints.

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