

# Does moral action depend on reasoning?



Alfred Mele

## Only if we're free.

In my view, we are morally responsible for a substantial share of our actions, and this would not be true if we never reasoned about them. Of course, not everyone who studies these

questions agrees with me. Many philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists would insist that moral responsibility depends on free will and that, over the past several decades, modern science has demonstrated that free will is an illusion.

The supposed evidence against the existence of free will has received a lot of press. In one much-reported finding, an experiment showed that certain patterns of brain activity can predict people's decisions up to ten seconds before they themselves are aware that they have made a choice. The study suggested that "the unconscious brain calls the shots" (as one news account put it). Another journalist, surveying recent research in neuroscience, concluded that free will, far from being "the defining feature of humanness," is "an illusion that endures only because biochemical complexity conceals the mechanisms of decision-making."

In the study that I cited above, the subjects were asked repeatedly to choose which of two buttons to press, one with their left hand or another with their right. Nothing hinged on the choice of buttons; the researchers just wanted to see what went on in their brains before they made their choices. Assuming that the subjects had no special bias for either button, we would be able to predict their choices accurately about half the time, on average, based only on coin tosses (heads for the left hand, tails for the right). In the actual study, the predictions based on unconscious, before-the-fact brain activity were right only about 60 percent of the time. That is an improvement, to be sure, over our coin-toss method, but does it really undermine the possibility of free will? Only if you think that free choices cannot be influenced in any way by preceding brain activity.

One strategy for arguing that something does not exist is to set the bar for its existence extremely high. You could claim, for instance, that there have never been any great basketball players — that the existence of great basketball players is an illusion — because to be a great basketball player an athlete has to average at least 100 points and 40 rebounds per game over at least 20 consecutive seasons. No one, of course, has ever come close to this standard. But most of us who are interested in basketball set the bar for greatness much lower, and we are not at all embarrassed to speak in superlatives about Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal.

Where should we set the bar for free will? Philosophers, theologians, and others have argued about this for a very long time. The higher one sets the bar, the more likely one is to deny the existence of free will. There is good scientific evidence that our conscious choices are never entirely independent of preceding brain activity or absolutely unconstrained by genetic factors and environmental circumstances. But does a defense of free will require a complete rejection of these limits? I don't think so. That would be like keeping Jordan and Shaq out of the Basketball Hall of Fame because they failed to meet my hypothetical standard for basketball greatness.

Last summer, at the World Science Festival in New York City, I took part in a discussion of free will with the neuroscientist Patrick Haggard of University College London and the Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner. An online *New York Times* article about the session inspired many bloggers to comment on the question of free will. Some said they believed in free will; others took the opposite position, citing scientific studies as support. Almost all of them sounded very confident. What struck me was the variety of different ways in which the bloggers seemed to understand free will. To some, it had to be utterly magical or absolutely unconstrained. Others thought of free will in a very practical, down-to-earth way. As you might expect, these premises about how to define free will correlated strongly with whether the bloggers affirmed or denied its existence.

So are we free enough to reason about many of our moral actions? Certainly. A good way to anchor our

thinking about free will to the real world is to view free will as a precondition for assigning moral responsibility. To the extent that we find it plausible to say that people sometimes deserve moral credit or blame for what they do, we should also find it plausible to see them as exercising free will. Thinking about free will in terms of our real-world assessment of moral responsibility tends to curb enthusiasm for setting the bar for its existence at dizzying heights.

There is evidence that discouraging people from believing in free will tends to promote bad behavior. In one study, subjects who read passages in which scientists asserted that free will is an illusion cheated significantly more often than others did on a subsequent task. (Those who read passages endorsing the idea of free will did about the same as those who read neutral passages.) In another study, subjects who read passages arguing against the existence of free will behaved more aggressively than a control group that read neutral passages: They served significantly larger amounts of spicy salsa to people who supposedly disliked spicy food, despite being told that these people had to eat everything on their plates!

If it were discovered that free will really is an illusion, we would have to learn to live with that news and its consequences. But I doubt that we will make any such discovery. Belief in free will has the attractive quality of being both true and morally beneficial.

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