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# Libet and Freedom in a Mind-Haunted World

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Saigle, Dubljevic, and Racine (2018) claim that Libet-style experiments are insufficient to challenge that agents have free will. They support this with evidence from experimental psychology that the folk concept of freedom is consistent with monism, that our minds are identical to our brains. However, recent literature suggests that evidence from experimental psychology is less than determinate in this regard, and that folk intuitions are too unrefined as to provide guidance on metaphysical issues like monism. In light of this, it is worthwhile to examine the authors' insufficiency claim under the assumption that monism is false and dualism true (our minds are not identical to our brains). We conclude that, were dualism true, then Libet-style experiments would tell us no more about freedom and moral responsibility than what the authors initially claimed, thus further bolstering their point that Libet-style experiments are ill-suited to speak to the free will of agents.

In what follows we first discuss some of the reasons to be skeptical of using folk intuitions to make claims about the nature of freedom and moral responsibility. We then draw from the work of E. J. Lowe to demonstrate that Libet-style experiments would likely give the same results regardless of the truth of monism or dualism.

## THE EVIDENCE

There are many reasons to be skeptical that the data of experimental psychology settle that the folk conception of freedom is consistent with monism. Here we briefly discuss three.

First, one might be unmoved by the appeal to folk intuitions in general, arguing that the threat posed by Libet-style experiments concerns free will itself, and not

what the folk *believe* about free will. One should hardly be moved by folk intuitions about, for instance, the relationship between gravity and acceleration in general relativity or fat intake and cardiovascular health. The folk lack the proper training to appreciate the relevant data in such technical fields as physics and biology. Why not think the same is true about the relationship between freedom and monism, which similarly involves highly complex and technical metaphysical concepts?<sup>1</sup> This line of thought is controversial but needs a response if one is going to rely on experimental data about folk judgments.<sup>2</sup>

Second, even granting the importance of investigating folk judgments, it is unclear what the judgments garnered in these studies actually show. Some (e.g., Feltz and Millan 2015) think that they merely express “free will no matter what” intuitions. Moreover, it's often hard to interpret whether folk judgments are tracking freedom, agency, autonomy, choice, attribution of responsibility or punishment, or some other related concept. This is also in line with Clark and colleagues' (2014) work hypothesizing that the folk belief in freedom is more concerned with justifying punishment than tracking free actions.

Third, Saigle and colleagues fail to sufficiently explore the role of the mental apart from the brain in folk conceptions of freedom. The authors contend that the work they appeal to shows that the folk conception of freedom is monistic, and so evidence of antecedent, highly predictive brain activity would not undermine freedom in the folk's sense. However, perhaps the most influential work on folk freedom challenges this. The *bypassing theory* of Nahmias and colleagues (see Nahmias, Coates, and Kvaran 2007; Murray and Nahmias 2014) shows that people are much less likely to ascribe freedom to an agent when the case is

1. This objection is a form of the expertise defense, which is a popular—though at times overstated—response to the experimental philosophy movement (e.g., see Williamson 2007).

2. Indeed, the proper response to the expertise defense was to provide arguments for why it was unsuccessful (e.g., see Weinberg et al. 2010).

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described in terms of neurochemistry as opposed to psychological states (Nahmias, Coates, and Kvaran 2007). In light of this, it is worth considering whether people are actually monists, seeing as they find a relevant distinction between the brain and mind in regard to freedom.

Without proper solutions to such difficulties, the authors should resist replying to the worry about the Libet studies by simply appealing to the idea that the folk conception of freedom is clearly consistent with deterministic monism.

### THE EMPIRICAL POSSIBILITY OF A MIND-HAUNTED WORLD

Here we examine whether Libet-style experiments can speak to the efficacy of the mind in causing our actions were dualism true. The threat of Libet-style experiments is that they purportedly show the inefficacy of the mind and, a fortiori, our decisions, were the mind not identical to the brain. It has been argued that were our decisions to play no role in causing our actions (i.e., were they epiphenomenal), then not only would those actions not be free but we would be systematically deceived about the relationship between our decisions and our actions in the physical world (Lowe 2008). The loss of blaming practices alone would demand severe revision to our beliefs (e.g., beliefs about blame, praise, punishment, and reward), but a loss of confidence that we are rational agents would undermine the scientific enterprise altogether. Monism provides an easy solution: If my mind is identical to my brain, then some of the neural states that sufficiently cause my actions are my decisions. However, there are compelling reasons to believe that monism is false, and the philosophical literature and evidence from folk intuitions both suggest that monism lacks consensus as the true theory of mind, meaning dualism cannot simply be dismissed in these discussions. Thus, it is worth asking, “Were dualism true, would Libet-style experiments be a potential threat to freedom and rationality?”

Our answer to the preceding question is “No.” However, before we discuss the shortcomings of Libet-style experiments, let us first get clear on the nature of the problem they are supposed to create. A common argument against dualism is that were we free and the world haunted by minds that are not identical to brains, then we should expect to see events (including actions) that are empirically inexplicable; according to our best science, all events appear empirically explicable; thus, if there are minds, then they must be identical to our brains. This line of inference assumes two things: (1) There is no systematic overdetermination, such that some event type has more than one sufficient cause (call this “no-overdetermination”), and (2) at every time at which any physical event has a cause, it has a sufficient physical cause (call this “physical causal closure”).<sup>3</sup>

Here is the argument restated with these assumptions made explicit:

1. If dualism is true and minds causally contribute to free actions, then either physical causal closure is false or no-overdetermination is false.
2. Physical causal closure is true.
3. No-overdetermination is true.
4. Therefore, it is not the case that dualism is true and minds causally contribute to free actions.<sup>4</sup>

The upshot of the argument, were it sound, is that our physical actions must be the result of an unbroken chain of physical events, which, if dualism is true, would entail epiphenomenalism and the denial of freedom. Libet-style experiments contribute to the dialectic by providing support for premise 2. Let us now turn to why it is that the support offered by Libet-style experiments is insignificant.

What is at issue is whether or not we should expect the truth of dualism to make a difference in the results of Libet-style experiments; there is little reason to expect that it would. At best, the experiments merely show that neural states are reliable predictors of physical actions. However, this hardly rules out the presence of a causally significant nonphysical mind. Imagine that we were able to exhaustively examine a causal chain, using empirical methods, as it unfolded from neural events to bodily actions; we should expect each member of the chain studied by this method to be a physical event. This is because empirical methods can do none other than study physical phenomena. To expect them to do more would be like expecting a phonograph to produce color rather than sound. Thus, if there are nonphysical mental events involved, they would go unnoticed, by design.

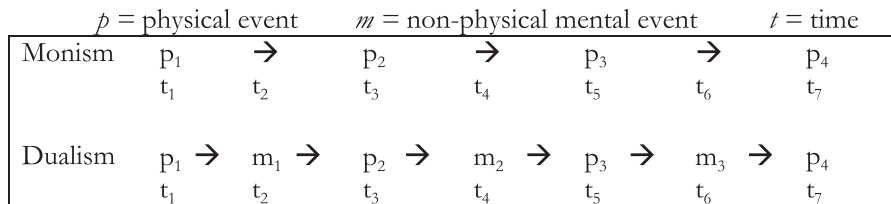
As a result, a monist world and dualist world can be empirically indistinguishable. Consider the monist and dualist causal chains represented in Figure 1.

Given that nonphysical mental events (m) are undetectable by empirical methods, the dualistic chain would appear empirically to contain only four physical events (p) occurring at odd times (t), which is what we would expect from the monistic chain as well. As such, the chains are empirically indistinguishable and would yield identical results according to Libet-style experiments. If we should expect the same results regardless of whether we are in a monist or dualist world, then Libet-style experiments are ill-suited to speak to the truth of either thesis.

One might object that because the dualist model postulates more entities, the monist model should be preferred, all things being equal (the saw of Ockham’s razor). But according to the dualist, all things are not equal. As Lowe points out, “In the mind-body case we start out with an initial intuition that mental events really do occur and are completely different from physical events” (2008, 77).

3. This is the formulation used by Lowe (2008, 48).

4. For more on this brand of argument see Kim (2000).




**Figure 1. Monist versus Dualist Causal Chains.**

Thus, as long as dualism is consistent with empirical findings, “it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that interactive dualism may well in fact be true” (Lowe 2008, 77). Also, for what it is worth, the dualist model is more capable of explaining the presence of Benjamin Libet’s “veto control.”<sup>5</sup> We conclude that not only are Libet-style experiments no threat to freedom given monism, but they are also no threat were dualism true. ■

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5. Libet thought his results were consistent with an agent retaining the ability to “veto” her intention before it is executed. This has sometimes been called “free won’t.” See Libet (1985, 538) for discussion.