

Free: Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will Review

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When it comes to interdisciplinary research on the subject of free will, few philosophers are better situated to comment than Al Mele. He has written numerous scholarly articles on the subject and has also written a book aimed directly at undergraduates (*A Dialogue on Free Will and Science*). With *Free: Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will*, Mele attempts to reach a wider audience of non-philosophers and non-students. In this respect, Mele's latest work falls into the growing category of pop-philosophy on the subject of free will.

The label of pop-philosophy is not meant as disrespect. Recent books from the likes of Michael Gazzaniga (*Who's in Charge* (Ecco, 2011)) and Sam Harris (*Free Will* (Free Press, 2012)) provide prominent attacks on the possibility of free will aimed at a non-philosophical audience. Mele provides an important defense of the possibility of free will against empirical findings. His book, then, serves two important functions: it makes the reader aware of the history of empirical arguments against the existence of free will while also making room for the possibility of free will in the face of these arguments. With regards to these two goals, I think the book is extremely successful. And at a mere 91 pages and only 6 chapters, this book is not the kind of intimidating tome that leads many non-philosophers to turn tail and run before even cracking it open.

In chapter 1, Mele lays out the range of definitions of free will one might endorse, making his own commitments clear, without resorting to the typical philosophical "-isms." He also previews his view that free will is (as yet) protected from serious empirical threat

regardless of your prior commitments. The material in this chapter and throughout is presented in an extremely accessible manner, including plenty of personalized touches and anecdotes to keep the reader engaged.

This accessibility belies some of the philosophical care that is also to be found in the book. Having presented the problem of free will in relatable terms in chapter 1, chapters 2-5 are broken down by argument and research tradition. Those familiar with the modern free will debate will recognize the usual suspects: Benjamin Libet, Daniel Wegner, and Patrick Haggard, among many others. Mele's responses are by no means new; but they are effectively packaged and presented for a broader audience.

Each of chapters 2-5 concludes with a "nut shell" summary of the argument presented in the chapter. These summaries are presented as premise-based reconstructions of the argument under consideration. For example, chapter 2 focuses on Libet's "readiness potential" experiments. Subjects were connected to an EEG measuring electricity levels across the brain. They were instructed to flex their wrist at any point and consciously to register the position of a hand on a clock when they became aware of their decision to flex. The EEG results found reliable electrical fluctuation associated with wrist movement occurring about a third of a second prior to reported conscious awareness of the decision to move. Here is how Mele reconstructs the argument against free will on the basis of this data:

Libet's argument in a nutshell

1. The participants in Libet's experiments don't make conscious decisions to flex. (Instead, they make their decisions unconsciously about half a second

before the muscle burst and become conscious of them about a third of a second later.).

2. So people probably never make conscious decisions to do things.
3. An action is a free action only if it flows from a consciously made decision to perform it.
4. Conclusion: there are probably no free actions. (23-24)

Such nutshell arguments not only provide a healthy injection of philosophical care into the book, they also provide a potentially valuable pedagogical tool. They provide a good opportunity for potential students to see how to take a piece of writing and pare it down into a carefully honed philosophical argument. It also affords Mele the opportunity to summarize his objections to the argument. (In the above case, Mele thinks all three premises are unwarranted.) So despite the accessibility of the book, it still provides ample opportunity to demonstrate a more careful philosophical methodology.

While Chapters 2 & 3 focus on Libet-style “readiness potential” studies from the eighties and their modern fMRI versions, Chapter 4 focuses on Daniel Wegner’s psychological “willusionism” arguments. In his book *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Bradford Books, 2003), Wegner draws on data from diverse research fields to argue for his “theory of apparent mental causation.” This theory holds that conscious experiences of willing are never the causes of our actions. Take for example, people playing with a Ouija board. The planchette is held by several individuals and begins to move around the board, even though none of the participants are consciously aware of moving the planchette. The hand movements that push the planchette around occur in the absence of any awareness of

a conscious intention. According to Wegner's theory, actions like those performed to move the planchette are the norm rather than the exception. That is, he presents a theory wherein conscious intentions are never causes of actions. The experience of conscious intention is at best an epiphenomenal report of one's actions.

Wegner's work constitutes an objection to free will if the immediate causal efficacy of conscious intention is required for free will. Mele's earlier monograph, *Effective Intentions*, provides a response to the necessity of occurrent conscious intentions for the performance of free actions. But Mele largely ignores this response to Wegner's work in this book. Instead, he summarizes his objection to Wegner as follows: "Wegner says that something he regards as *necessary* for free will never happens... Yet, he backs it up only with Libet's data and evidence from fringe cases, combined with the highly disputable assertion that all human actions are caused basically the same way... My claim that conscious intentions (or their neural correlates) are among the causes of *some* human actions is much less bold." (51)

It seems to me that Mele's characterization of the objection to free will raised by Wegner's work undersells the problem. Wegner does not just rely on intuitions about "fringe cases" like Ouija boards and other automatisms. Wegner argues that if the experience of conscious intention is a cause of our actions, then variations in the experience should lead to variations in the action performed. He uses controlled studies to show that experiences of willing and the successful execution of an action can vary independently of each other. These include fairly high-level actions such as manipulating a computer mouse to click on an image upon instruction (The so called "I-Spy" experiment).

Mele's attempt to focus complex scientific and philosophical work into easily digestible chunks without jargon here comes at the cost of a full treatment of the richness of Wegner's work. The descriptive and predictive adequacy of the theory of apparent mental causation itself plays an important role in making Wegner's generalizations about human actions plausible. Furthermore, even if Wegner is wrong that conscious intentions never cause human actions, he may still have a strong case for thinking that conscious intentions play a much more limited role in our cognitive economy than we might have thought. Even if free will is still a possibility, we could be a good deal less free than we might have at first thought.

Chapter 5 uses psychological studies in support of situationism to argue against free will. This argument takes classic social psychology experiments, such as Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment, as evidence that human behavior is entirely driven by the relationship between the environment one finds oneself in and various automatic behavioral processes. The dramatic effect of environment on behavior is taken to show that our behavior results from external causal pressure rather than free action.

Mele rightly argues that being susceptible to external influence in certain situations does not in itself show that humans never have free will. In order to disprove free will, one would have to show that it is the case that one *never* acts freely. External influences in particular cases may show that in some cases we are not free (or perhaps are less free), but don't yet show that we are never free. Similar to his response to Wegner, Mele argues that the conclusions are too hasty on the basis of the evidence.

This overarching strategy is explicitly voiced in the 6th and final chapter. Here Mele discusses general connections between empirical evidence and the possibility of free will.

He writes, "One conclusion I argued for in earlier chapters is that the data do not justify various empirical propositions featured in these arguments. If my arguments are successful, the scientific arguments are shown to be unsuccessful even before there is any need to examine claims about what 'free will' means." (91) This allows Mele to argue that regardless of what you think free will is, science has not yet disproven it. As a way of staving off dramatic headlines to the effect that, "Science Says: Free Will Doesn't Exist," this argument can be an effective tactic.

The adoption of this style of argumentation should be kept in mind by any philosopher considering the book as an empirical contribution to free will discussion in the classroom setting. Mele focuses more on the empirical adequacy of the arguments rather than background philosophical issues and so doesn't provide a strong sense of the debate about free will as it has taken place within academic philosophy. While the usual suspects among scientists show up, very few philosophers do. Discussion in chapter 1 regarding views one might take towards free will occurs in isolation from traditional philosophical debates about the topic. There is little mention of compatibilism, or Frankfurt examples, or agent causation, or other reoccurring concepts in philosophical debates about free will. For this reason, I think the book would work better as a modern empirical addendum to more classic texts on free will such as the Derk Pereboom-edited collection of essays found in *Free Will* (Hackett Publishing Company, 2nd ed., 2009).

Other recent empirical work on free will one might wish to include in a philosophy course does fall outside the purview of the book. Mele makes brief mention of recent experimental philosophy work (Eddie Nahmias, and Monroe and Malle, among others). As the dialogue between philosophy and science progresses, it is becoming increasingly

difficult to discuss what science might be *showing* us to be true (N.B. not proven conclusively) without discussing the closely linked question of what free will is. For example, Shaun Nichols' recent book *Bound: Essays on Free Will and Responsibility* (Oxford University Press, 2015), addresses some of the close connections between how we think about the problem of free will, empirical research, and conclusions about whether free will is an illusion. For the philosopher interested in including more empirical research in their free will class, this book could pair nicely with Mele's.

On the whole, I think Mele's book fills a much-needed niche. It provides a commendably clear, direct, accessible, and unpretentious response to the growing scientific literature attacking the possibility of free will. (As a personal note, I have been approached in coffee shops on more than one occasion by complete strangers who have "read this one book" and are happy to explain why I don't need to keep writing about free will: it's already been shown not to exist). It is organized with care by a person particularly well positioned to discuss both the science and the philosophy surrounding the free will debate. As a teaching tool, these are all extremely attractive qualities that could make *Free: Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will* a valuable supplement to an undergraduate course on free will.

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