

Opposites attract

About the concept 'hence' in the determinism–free will debate

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'Do we have free will?' Benjamin Libet (1999, 47) asks in the title of his paper on free will as opposed to determinism. Based on 'intuition', most people tend to answer this question in favour of free will (Dennett, 2007, 1). Scientists on the other hand tend to favour determinism, due to the assumed impossibility to measure – thus the unscientific character – of free will (Wegner & Wheatley, 1999, 480). The debate on the existence of free will as opposed by determinism is striking for a number of reasons, one of which is the character of the debate itself. In the debate determinism and free will are presented as the two available categories, and sides are often chosen by rejection of the other one. The process of argumentation in the debate typically is of the form 'x is false by means of science/intuition, *hence*, y is true'. The question in the current paper is whether it is tenable to perceive free will and determinism as such opposing categories, and how that relates to the use of the concept 'hence' in the debate.

As Libet asks the question whether we *have* free will, the debate might benefit from a more thorough understanding of what *is* free will. How are the terms free will and determinism defined in order to decide which side is tenable? Opponent of free will Dick Schwaab defines it as 'the possibility to make choices without influence of external or internal cues' (Sinjan, 2010, 72). Proponent Benjamin Libet states that free will implies that 'one could be held consciously responsible for one's choice to act or not to act' (1999, 52). Free will thus is causal for human behaviour. Libet restricts this notion by stating that free will is 'not to initiate a voluntary act, but rather to *control* whether the act takes place' (54), so the human being can unconsciously be prepared for action but has a conscious free possibility to veto that action. On a basic level people are determined by their atomic make-up and are restricted by the laws of nature, but on a certain higher level they are able to prohibit prepared action, which implies that people are free to choose to act one way *or* another. Opponents of determinism Wegner and Wheatley (1999) on the other hand, reject such a higher level by stating that the experience of free will is determined by lower level brain mechanisms as well.

In the 19th century Pierre-Simon Laplace defined determinism as 'an 'intelligence' who at a given instant in time knows the state of all elements of which the universe is composed and, moreover, has an unlimited capacity for computing' (1814; in: Kampen, 1991, 274). Through time, broad types of 'intelligences' have been proposed, such as 'God' and 'nature'. In physical sciences, nature is accepted as the cause for events in the world. With regard to human beings though, a consensus on the determination of behaviour has not been

reached. The *homunculus*, the ‘inner puppeteer who pulls the body’s strings’ (Dennett, 2007, 6), has lost most of its popularity (Gray, 2002), and its proposed heir ‘nature’ has not yet been inaugurated. Such natural determinism would imply that human beings behave ‘as machines that act in a manner completely controlled by the known physical laws’ (Libet, 1999, 56). This envisioning of determinism yet only covers the aspect of causation, in accordance to Laplace’s ‘ontological determinism’ (Kampen, 274). If every event in the world is caused by principally knowable mechanisms (whether or not human beings can objectively be aware of them), every event in the world should also be predictable. This is to say that if determinism holds, we not only should (principally) be able to know the causes of events before a certain time t , but also beyond that time t .

However, striking is that proponents of determinism with regard to human beings do not seem to hold this vision of a future reaching determination. They tend to favour a moderate version that lies in the scope of scientific reductionism (Kieviet et al., in press¹) rather than in the implication of a constant future causation of events. Curiously, the opponents of determinism also seem to hold this nuance, as Libet asks ‘whether our consciously willed acts are fully determined by natural laws that govern the activities of nerve cells in the brain, or whether acts and the conscious decisions to perform them can proceed to some degree independently of natural determinism’ (54). According to Dick Schwaab determinism makes free will illusory (Sinjan, 2010, 70), but according to Libet within the scope of determinism some sort of free will does exist. So, if we overview the arguments to argue for or against determinism or free will, the two sides do not seem so opposite after all. The position one could take favouring one or the other depends on the way both sides are defined, which might make one wonder if these are really two distinct opposing categories, or that free will might be a subcategory mediating a scale of determinism, or that it even are two distinct scales that both could be true to a certain extent (which Dennett (2007) calls compatibilism).

Nonetheless, in the debate opponents and proponents do argue for or against determinism *as opposed* to free will, which shapes the character of the debate, illustrated by Hans Dooremalen’s utterance that ‘we – as scientists – should accept determinism, [...] hence the conclusion that free will indeed is an illusion’ (Philosophy of Psychology, December 24th, sheet 117). Suppose that the two sides are thus defined that it essentially are two distinct categories (regardless of the favour to one or the other), so say that x is determinism and y is

¹ see Femke Truijens, Philosophy of Psychology, Paper I

free will or vice versa. As was stated in the introduction of the current paper, most participants in the debate follow the argumentation of $\neg x \rightarrow y$: if x is false than y is true. Logically this sentence may be valid, but as a scientific devise to decide between determinism and free will it seems to be at odds with the basic perspectives in science.² According to Karl Popper (1972), scientists, desiring to discover *truth*, try to design experiments that show falsity of statements, so that they could peel of the layers of all sorts of untenable statements in order to come somewhat closer to ‘the truth’. Based on Poppers perspective on science, scientists tend to reject free will because it is not falsifiable as a scientific statement. The term $\neg x$ in the logical sentence above thus represents the aim of scientist headed towards scientific falsification.

However, the conclusion drawn from the falsity of one of the sides, namely the trueness of the other, is at odds with the basic idea of scientific experimentation. That is to say, concluding that one option is false *hence* the other one is right, seems to be an aim directed at verification (Carnap, 1995), which nowadays is considered an unscientific goal (Leezenberg & De Vries, 2007). Moreover, to reject one category due to its unscientific character, to then adopt a perspective that might be just as unscientific because we could never oversee its scope (that is to say, we test the reductionist side of determinism but we can never be sure about the deterministic implication of ‘exactly one physically possible future’ (Inwagen; In: Dooremalen, Philosophy of Psychology, December 22th) without relying on induction) is at least odd. So beyond the possibility to draw such a conclusion if it is not even clear whether x and y are terms that can really be opposed (although that just might be attractive), one might wonder if the hunt for one holy grail in the *determinism-free will* debate is scientific at all.

² see Femke Truijens, Philosophy of Psychology, paper III

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