Free Will beyond the (Conscious) Brain? Natural Autonomy Perspective

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Abstract

Neuroscientific interest in free will reaches back to the experiment of Libet (1985) and its hard interpretations that fundamentally questioned our common presumptions about human agency. More recent studies continue to make similar claims based on the assumption that simple, proximal and non-premeditated movements are representative of real-life decisions (Soon *et al.* 2008, Fried *et al.* 2011). It appears that proving free will an illusion simply boils down to showing that isolated conscious intentions cannot straightforwardly cause the corresponding action *now.*

This ultimately has to do with regarding human consciousness as the seed of free agency. Although the puzzle of direct mental causation could be solved by appealing to a long-term, modal efficacy of proximal intentions (Tse 2013, Mumford and Anjum 2015), the problem remains.

Dynamical theories of cognition reconsider the mind-brain relationship by seeing neural activity as a *dynamical system* (Shapiro 2011), exhibiting *chaotic* (practically unpredictable) behaviour and controlled via global patterns of synchronisation (Tsuda 2001). Such an approach avoids reducing the brain to a series of electric circuits and encourages looking at the global picture. Furthermore, it offers a modest possibility of *being able to do otherwise*, which seems crucial for asserting moral responsibility of an agent.

To be (relatively) able to do otherwise is typical for living organisms and some authors even trace it back to the *random walk* performed by fruit flies or bacteria (Heisenberg 2009). *Biological autonomy* comes in degrees and is always relative to the organism's dependence on the environment (Rosslenbroich 2005). Thus, what we usually associate with the mind in fact originates in the pre-cognitive and pre-neural functionality and causal closure (Moreno and Mossio 2015). It will be argued that although biological autonomy benefits from autonomization of the nervous system and peaks at a higher level of cognitive control, bodily aspects other than the brain should not be underestimated. This has important implications for ethics, since it opens the way for a more holistic view of human agency.