



Commentary

Social psychology cares about causal conscious thought, not free will *per se*

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The target article is a response to internet blog posts and not to the published record. This distinction matters because while the blog posts debated free will, within the peer-reviewed, scientific psychological literature the debate has always been over a somewhat different issue: the causal nature of conscious as opposed to automatic cognitive processes on higher mental processes such as judgment, behaviour, and motivation. These are distinct issues because conscious processes can be part of the causal chain even though they themselves are caused; thus, logically, conscious processes can be causal even though free will (the 'uncaused causer') does not exist. This debate within psychology over the causal efficacy of conscious processes is now 100 years old (Watson, 1912) and the recent blog exchanges that prompted the target article are better understood within that historical context instead of within the definitional debates within philosophy about the concept of free will.

The question of free will is of interest to us all. The target article (Miles, 2011) takes some social psychologists, myself included, to task for discussing it in an internet blog exchange a few years ago. In response I would like to make two basic points. First, the debate among psychologists takes place formally in the published record of journal articles and books (mainly book chapters). This is the permanent record, as opposed to the relatively transient and ephemeral world of blogs. As I understand (and use) them, blogs are like newspaper columns or spontaneous radio interviews, and meant to be a forum wherein one can provide the interested public with opinions, feelings, and conjectures; blogs are thus a potentially valuable outlet for ideas when used and evaluated appropriately. Unfortunately, the author of the target article does not seem to appreciate the difference between blog entries and journal articles, and treats the former as if they were the latter. That they are different – the one is personal property whereas the latter is public property – is illustrated by one's ability to edit, change, or delete one's personal blog entries and one's concomitant inability to do the same with published works (except to make necessary corrections with the consent of the journal editor).

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Why this matters here is because the target article refers to, discusses, and criticizes only some blog posts of mine, and does not cite or mention my one published chapter on the free will topic (Bargh, 2008) nor any of my research journal articles that bear, at least indirectly, on the issue of free will. If those had been consulted they would show that I have already made and endorsed the same logical arguments against the existence of free will (as a philosophical concept) that he does in his target article.

A second reason why it matters is that the target article is critical of and draws conclusions about the field of social psychology based on a few blog posts and without any scholarly attention to the actual content of that field, as published over many decades in traditional outlets such as journals and books. In my opinion, one should take the time and effort to learn and read something about a field before one criticizes it.

The target-article author's position on the issue of free will, relative to that of the recent social psychology blogging on the topic, falls along the same fault lines as the split in philosophy between Kant and the existential philosophers, most notable Nietzsche and Sartre. Kant's logical approach to the issue of existence was to make it a non-issue because, as he argued, logically, existence as a concept was redundant: something had to exist in some form to be conceptualized in the first place. And so here with the target-article author's position on free will: that it cannot logically exist because nothing can be the cause of itself. But this misses the point of why human beings (and thus psychologists) are so interested in the topic (which is the very reason the present exchange is being published in this Journal), and why, Kant notwithstanding, people do have very real and deeply important existential concerns. Philosophy may define the problem away logically, but psychology (which, it needs to be pointed out here, is a different discipline than philosophy) is less concerned about the logic of the matter than with the phenomenal experiences (fears, anxieties, hopes) that the matter incites and provokes within living breathing human beings going about their daily lives (see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2013).

As noted in my chapter published in 2008, much of the heat and froth in public (as well as private) debates about the existence of free will is attributable to the term meaning different things to different people. Political science uses the term to mean freedom from external causation (Arendt, 1978); in this sense there is much less free will in totalitarian than in democratic governmental systems. Much of psychology too uses the term to mean freedom from external stimulus or internal impulsive control of behaviour, and (especially in the domain of self-regulation research) equates free will with the exercise of conscious overrides of these automatic influences. Philosophy, according to the author of this target article, equates free will with freedom from any control or causation (internal or external) at all.

Historically, when psychologists talk about 'free will' they have really been talking about whether conscious thoughts are causal. Indeed, this debate is now in its centennial year, dating back to the behaviourists' break with introspective methods (Watson, 1912). The debate of this past century – which Baumeister and I participating in with the blog posts discussed in the target article, as well as in debates at several annual conferences over the years – has been over the causal nature of conscious thought, not about free will as defined and dissected by philosophers. You do not find 'free will' in the scientific psychology publications, but you do find articles and reviews on the causal status of conscious thought processes. For example, in the recent psychological literature bearing on free will, two major articles by Baumeister and Masicampo (2010) and Baumeister, , and Vohs (2011) in the *Annual Review of Psychology* and the *Psychological Review* are titled 'Do Conscious Thoughts Cause Behavior?' and 'Conscious Thoughts are For Facilitating the Animal-Cultural Interface'.

The conclusion reached in these reviews is that conscious thought does participate, not all of the time out of necessity, but often and when and where it is most needed, as part of the causal chain of human judgment and behaviour. Conscious thought and mental processes are themselves caused, by external events and by unconsciously operating processes, so in harmony with the target article, they are not evidence for 'free will' in the Searle-ian sense of an uncaused cause. Conscious and unconscious processes cause and in turn are caused by each other, each relying on the other form of mental processing to accomplish its tasks (see Baumeister & Bargh, in press).

So the target article has misunderstood the nature and reason for the recent blog posts and debates within social psychology, although we were using the term 'free will' perhaps too loosely, we were actually continuing a healthy, century-long dialectic within psychology, which concerns whether our own private internal dialogue with ourselves has a causal role in directing our lives over and above unconscious, automatic forces from within (*pace* Freud) or triggered by external stimuli (*pace* Watson and Skinner).

The moral of this story would seem to be that psychologists should be more careful in drawing conclusions about 'free will' and make it clear that what we are really talking about is the causal nature of conscious thought. (In matter of fact outside of some blog posts the recent journal and handbook reviews have done just that.) Philosophers, by the same token, should be more sensitive to the historical traditions and debates within neighbouring fields, and mindful of the fact that the important questions in those fields may not be the same as their own.

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