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# Unconscious Acts as Acts with Moral Responsibility

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although free will and moral responsibility tend to be causally linked, this is not a direct one-to-one relationship, as it is commonly perceived. I argue that moral responsibility extends beyond free will actions, such that some unconscious actions, which would not easily be described as free, do in fact carry the weight of moral responsibility all the same. This is primarily evidenced through the clear influence that conscious decisions have on the unconscious framework for decision making that a person uses to act without conscious input. Though free will is limited by factors such as the framework of birth, the age at which one can enforce free will decisions, and by inherent biological limitations on free will, some circumstances remain outside of these parameters in which free will can influence attitudes, and these attitudes determine unconscious actions; therefore, these actions carry moral responsibility.

## **KEYWORDS**

Free Will, Unconscious Actions, Moral Responsibility, Willpower, Attitudes, Schemas, Behavior, Social Psychology, Agency, Will

## INTRODUCTION

Belief in free will is an underlying principle upon which all society is founded. When people believe in responsibility and punishment and reward, they are implicitly believing in free will. They are believing in the concept of humans as agents, causative factors in this world. Often, people don't even think about this; it acts as an underlying foundation that shapes the way they interpret events. However, the assumption often arises that for an action to have moral responsibility, it must be so that the act was directly, freely chosen. Free will is inherently linked with moral responsibility — if we, as human beings, had no choice in an act, how can we be held responsible for it? If we could not have made another decision, no matter what, how could it still be considered our fault? The fact is, moral responsibility extends beyond free choices. Unconscious decisions are influenced by prior conscious decisions, such that even if an unconscious act is not free, it still carries the weight of moral responsibility. Thus, while in that moment the choice may be intuitive and faster than consciousness can process, in the long term, they were decisions of free will which *led to* that act. Unconscious actions are not under our control in that moment, but some are under our control in the long term, which means that we still carry the weight of moral responsibility for those acts.

## IN DEFINING FREE WILL AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

In order to discuss moral responsibility, we must first discuss free will. And, in order to discuss free will, we must first define it. A major issue in discussions of free will is that there is no overarching, agreed upon definition. This can result in a problem of equivocation — arguments are made in which the definition of free will is glossed over, instead of explicitly defined, and often that definition can even change within a single argument.

In defining free will, I operate under the libertarian viewpoint, in that a free act is something that *originates* causally within the person performing the action. I reject compatibilism (or soft determinism) because compatibilism requires an inherent redefinition of the term free will — the only way to reconcile free will and a fully deterministic universe. Thomas Hobbes, one of the first soft determinists, says “a man is self determining when he is not prevented by conditions beyond his control from determining his action in accordance with his will (i.e. intentions or desires)” (Kane 1985, 7). This is “free will” allowing for compatibilism with determinism, because it's not about choice but about desire. However, this is

reinterpreting the entire concept of free will for the sake of making these concepts compatible. Hobbes' free will involves one inevitable choice — it's just that that choice is the one which a person desires to make. This isn't *free*. It's just what you *will*. It's only half of the term.

Rather than accepting this redefinition of term, I instead follow along the lines of Robert Kane, a philosopher at the University of Texas and one of the leading contemporary authors on free will. Kane defines free will by saying, "Free will is the power in human beings... to originate or bring into existence the purposes or ends that guide their actions" (1985, 2).

The conclusion is often drawn that there is a tight connection between freedom and consciousness. Roy Baumeister studied people's perceptions of free will and found that "conscious, rational choice and selfcontrol seem to be integral parts of what people perceive as free" (2008, 16). It becomes naturally assumed that for an act to be free, it must be something the person is aware of choosing. If I take a drink of water without being aware I'm taking a drink of water, as an instinctive response to thirst, then I haven't *chosen* to take a drink of water. The follow up conclusion is that I have not *freely* taken a drink at all. Some philosophers make this assumption more or less explicit, which leads to Gallagher's definition of free will. Shaun Gallagher, a philosopher from the University of Memphis, says that free will is not about muscle movements at all, but about the overarching goal, the *intended result*. He states that motor control processes are "subpersonal" and not involved in free will at all (Gallagher 2006, 118). If free will is about intent, it must be conscious. This assumption isn't always made so explicit, however; neuroscientist Benjamin Libet made this assumption without defining free will explicitly at all (Libet, 1992). Explicitly or not, people reconcile the person as a causative agent with the mounting evidence that neurons within the brain are what initiate actions by providing consciousness as the bridge between them. However, simply because free actions stop with conscious activity, this does not extend to claiming moral responsibility stops as well. It's important to establish parameters for free will for reasons beyond simple philosophical curiosity because free will is so tightly linked to moral responsibility. In order to maintain that moral responsibility ever exists, one must admit to the existence of free will. If a person could not have freely chosen another route, he cannot be held morally responsible (he can be punished, but that's an entirely different argument). Thus, if moral responsibility exists, free will too must exist at some point. *If conscious actions are free*, then

unconscious actions can have moral responsibility. Whether or not there is free will to begin with is beyond the scope of this paper. If so, *conscious acts can bring into existence one's ends*, and therefore conscious acts have moral responsibility. What I will argue, beyond this, is that if conscious acts have moral responsibility, then unconscious actions can also have moral responsibility. Unconscious acts follow from conscious processing.

I posit that moral responsibility of an act requires free will *at some point in life* but not every act needs to be conscious and free to be considered a moral one. To be clear up front: this is not to say that every unconscious act has moral responsibility; rather, *some* unconscious acts have moral responsibility. Even so, many and perhaps most of the acts for which we are responsible may be unconscious. Unconscious actions make up most of our acts by far, for reasons of mental efficiency. Human beings use mental shortcuts. We are not physiologically capable of fully examining every situation for its costs and benefits — it simply is not a possibility. For time and mental processing reasons, many decisions are made without ever reaching conscious awareness.

If the definition of free will is applied only to acts that are *immediate* in the causal power of the agent, where *in that moment* the person could chose otherwise — this presents an interest contrast to the assumption that moral responsibility only occurs in free acts. That is, if unconscious actions are not free, if the definition of free will is taken strictly, then acts can bear moral responsibility without being free. This goes against the natural tendency to tightly associate moral responsibility with *only free acts*. For some, this tendency goes so far as suggest an *analytic* connection, or a connection as a matter of *definition*. This is evident, for example, when Daniel Dennett, a philosopher and cognitive scientist, defines free will as “whatever it is that gives us moral responsibility” (2008). To say free will is so tightly associated with moral responsibility is to define free will in much broader terms than I have above. Free acts are conscious, but moral responsibility does not have to be.

## **SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Attitudes are defined as an “evaluative reaction toward something or someone (often rooted in one’s beliefs, and exhibited in one’s feelings and intended behavior)” (Myers 2013, 120). Attitudes can be something we are consciously aware of or something implicit. Behaviors, on the other hand, are the actions taken,

whether consciously or unconsciously. In this case, we will focus on *unconscious* actions. Unconscious actions can be a result of purely situational factors, such as, or a result of the attitudes that a person holds. The situation is not something we typically control. An unconscious action driven by situational influence, wherein the action is because of the situation and therefore could not have happened otherwise, is not one for which a person has moral responsibility. However, an action due to *attitudes* is an action that could have happened one way, but could also have happened another, based on the attitudes that person holds, and attitudes can be changed by conscious actions. This is the key difference which gives these actions moral responsibility.

It is not just attitudes that shape unconscious reactions in the moment, however. These attitudes were previously formed by conscious decisions. Playing a role, for example, can quickly influence attitudes which in turn affect behaviors (Myers 2013, 127). This was strongly demonstrated in the well known Zimbardo Prison Study, in which college students assigned to the roles of prisoner and guard took on these roles so strongly the experiment had to be terminated (Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo 1973). It has been also found that the mere act of saying something can cause it to become an attitude, as long as it is something a person is saying of his own free will (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959). Consciously choosing words affects future, unconscious acts. Consciously chosen behaviors can also influence future unconscious acts because they influence behaviors. Positive behaviors toward a person shift attitudes toward that person in a positive way (Myers 2013, 129). In addition, it has been found that not only do we tend to hurt those that we already dislike, but that hurting someone actually leads to more disliking (Myers 2013, 131). Thus, hurting a person changes our attitude toward that person into something more negative, as a way of justifying our having hurt them. This is especially true when the hurtful behavior was a choice, rather than the result of coercion — we take more internal responsibility for an act which we have chosen (Myers 2013, 131), and thus it has more influence on our attitude. This negative attitude means a person is primed for unconscious negative actions in the future, such as passing this person over for a treat that is randomly awarded.

Deliberate decisions (*free* decisions) can also change emotional reactions. Perhaps a person is attending anger management classes. He may be told to breathe deeply and repeat a mantra such as “relax” to himself, in order to calm his anger reaction. Repeatedly managing his anger reaction in the present will

reduce his anger reaction in the future — conscious decisions now, affect his future emotional reactions.

Experiences and prior decisions shape *schemas*, which are mental frameworks for how we view the world. These schemas are what people use in conjunction with attitudes to make unconscious decisions. For example, if a person has a prejudicial schema that says, *all people from Asia are smart*, she will look at a person from Asia and assume that he is smart. This may lead her to unconsciously decide to ask him for help with her homework, without even recognizing that it was her underlying schema that caused her to make the decision. But just because this particular decision that the Asian student would be smarter and to therefore consult him because of that was not conscious, does not mean that it was not a decision in which she had a choice, at some point. This is the critical factor — she has moral responsibility for her decision because she did, at one point, have control over the outcome. Perhaps earlier in life she had a chance to become friends with a family from Asia, which would have reshaped her schemas. But she freely and consciously chose not to. Would people then say her prejudice is not her fault, that she has no moral responsibility for it? No, because she *chose* to allow her prejudice to continue. She had a chance to reshape her prejudices and schemas, and freely chose not to. The consequences of that decision are a product of her free will, and therefore also free actions.

It has been pointed out that, in this scenario, what she had conscious control over was not in shaping the attitude which she held, but rather in consciously deciding the action, which consequently (and perhaps unintentionally) alters her attitude. Thus, perhaps the schema alteration is not conscious and intentional. However, to this I counter that it matters less that it *is* altered consciously and more that it *can be* altered consciously. If a person is aware of schemas, then he or she can consciously make decisions with awareness of how these decisions may alter schemas. Even if a person is not aware of the term schema, he or she may understand that behaviors shape attitudes on a conceptual level — it is, after all, the theory behind the saying, “Fake it until you make it.” Behave as if you are who you want to be, and you will become that ideal self. This is what shaping attitudes with conscious decisions is, at the heart.

## LIMITATIONS

At several points I have mentioned that some unconscious actions have moral responsibility, but not all. Though it is impossible to list every situation and whether it is or is not one which moral responsibility is applicable to, that does not mean that some specific parameters cannot be established. First, it is demonstrable that free will itself is inherently limited, and this limits the situations in which a person can conceivably alter his or her schemas. Conscious decision making requires the use of a myriad of neural circuits, which means it requires the use of a large quantity of glucose. Glucose is in limited supply within the human body, and when some is used, less is available for the future (Baumeister 2008, 17). This is why willpower is considered to be a limited concept — the more you use willpower in a day, the more difficult it becomes to resist future temptations (Vohs and Faber 2007). This limits our ability to make free, conscious, schema shaping decisions to certain circumstances which cannot be generalized very well.

Additionally, it was posited in a critique of this essay that free will is limited by society — for example, I am limited by society such that I would not be truly free to stand up, kick over my chair, steal someone else's water bottle, and abruptly exit the room. However, I argue that this is, again, a misrepresentation of the separate terms of free will. This is, rather than a limitation on what I am *free* to do, a limitation of what I *will* to do. I do not truly will to do this because I am a conscious being capable of weighing costs and benefits. However, I am free to do so, should I decide that the benefit of emotional release in this moment outweighs the consequences of disapproval and whatever else may follow.

However, the core argument made is that free will is limited, and this is a valuable point. Free will is limited, in more ways than its scarcity and thus necessary rationing. Free will operates within a limited framework. This is to say that a person's birth is relevant to the free will choices which he or she can feasibly make. If a person is born into poverty, by nature he or she has fewer options from which to freely choose. If free will decisions are limited, shaping of attitudes is subsequently limited, and thus fewer unconscious actions can be considered to carry the weight of moral responsibility. Humans are unable to choose the framework within which they are born, and this necessarily limits free will. In addition, age is a major factor in free will decisions. For example, although a child can choose freely biologically, he or she does not have the strength to force these decisions through if an adult disagrees. Thus, a child cannot freely

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choose his or her own environment, and has less influence on shaping his or her own attitudes. The age at which a child can choose his or her own environment is culturally determined, and thus this becomes another vagary in terms of which situations can be considered under the influence of freely shaped schemas. Free will is limited, thus attitude shaping is limited, thus those unconscious actions which are the result of consciously influenced attitudes are also limited.

## **CONCLUSION**

As I understand it, free will is the power that we, as human beings have, to bring into existence our own ends, thereby giving us moral responsibility. Free will requires conscious decisions to precipitate actions. Conscious actions fit this definition every time, and therefore have moral responsibility. Some unconscious actions are exclusively the products of situational factors beyond a person's control and do not fit this definition, and therefore are not acts for which we are morally responsible. However, other unconscious actions are a clear product of strong attitudes and schemas, which are a product of prior conscious behaviors. This is why we are morally responsible for these unconscious behaviors.



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