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Freewill: An Automatic Response

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## Freewill: An Automatic Response.

The debate regarding the existence of human freewill has been waged since the dawn of scientific thought. Throughout history, philosophers, theologians and psychologists have discussed and argued whether we humans are able to direct and spontaneously produce our own actions, or if we are at the mercy of external or even internal forces beyond our control. To most individuals it would seem to be self evident that the human mind has the capability to be self-directing. As Descartes (1642) exclaimed, “Am I so dependent on the body and the senses that without these I cannot exist?” However the very notion of human freewill stands against the predictability of human behavior, defying the existence of parsimonious rules by which we can classify and quantify people. As scientific empiricists many of us within the field of psychology are distraught that the human mind might ultimately elude our attempts at quantification and prediction. However, in denying the existence of human freewill, we may do a disservice, not only to the field of psychology, but to clients in psychotherapy who ask assistance from psychologists so that they might rediscover freewill and the ability to exercise rational choice within their own lives.

Whereas in the past psychological determinism was largely the realm of the psychoanalysts and the radical behaviorists, a new wave of determinism has emerged within the field of cognitive psychology. Among this number would appear to be Kirsch and Lynn (July, 1999) who very intelligently argue that the experiences of emotion, thought and especially decision making, are largely the product of response expectancies, essentially automated responses which are elicited under specific environmental circumstances. Some interesting examples are provided, such as placebo effects, sexual arousal, and hypnosis, to support the

construct of response expectancies. The authors furthermore suggest ways in which the use and adaptation of response sets may facilitate behavior change in the therapeutic environment.

Thus it would seem that an individual's actions, though they may seem to have been initiated through conscious choice, are actually automated responses. We can take from this theory that in therapy these response expectancies can essentially be reprogrammed to produce more adaptive behaviors. What is interesting is that it would seem that the construct of response expectancies is actually very similar to the notion of fixed action patterns within the field of zoology. With fixed action patterns, an animal responds to a specific environmental stimuli in a preprogrammed, or instinctual manner (Tinbergen, 1968), (ex. a male plover will do an aggressive dance when it comes in contact with another male plover). That these fixed action patterns are elicited through a combination of environmental stimuli and unconscious processes within the animal sounds similar to the theory of response expectancies.

Do humans engage in fixed action patterns? Almost certainly so, particularly for activities that are routine or boring. An individual driving a car along a highway is largely behaving in an automatic fashion. Turns in the wheel or adjustments in speed are elicited through a combination of environmental stimuli and largely unconscious or automatic cognitive processes. But is this the part and parcel of the human mind? Given that humans do engage in some automatic responses, does this deprive us of freewill?

It would seem to be unlikely that this is the case. Should that same individual choose to take an alternate route one day, his or her actions will no longer be automatic, and he or she will need to decide which way to go at each turn. It is also arguable that the process of automation for many activities exists in order to free the human mind to engage in less routine cognitive pursuits. The individual driving the car using automatic cognitive processes, is likely still using

their mind to make myriad other decisions. What should they do first when they reach their destination? Should they stop for lunch? Will they be able to make the entire distance without stopping for a restroom break? Many, and perhaps most decision-making processes would appear to take place in the absence of any direct environmental elicitation. How then could the behaviors they ultimately produce, perhaps hours, days or months later be automatic?

The notion of freewill is anathema to scientific positivism. Some researchers would have us believe, if it can not be demonstrated empirically then it must not exist, or at best is not worthy of study. However the variance in human behavior explained by biology or environment is only part of the total variance, and as suggested by Lewontin (1990) we may never be able to fully understand all facets of human cognition. This implies that there is more to human cognition than simply biology and the environment, and that which psychometricians so ignominiously refer to as “error variance” may oftentimes be variance due to each participant’s individuality or freewill. We might be reminded also that most of the research in automatic human responses has been garnished either from contrived laboratory settings (in which participants may temporarily suspend freewill under the direction of the scientist), or through clinical populations (who may be in therapy as a result of difficulty asserting the freewill required to make rational choices).

This might all be subject to a pleasant philosophical debate, were it not for the potentially damaging impact such implications might have for psychotherapy. Much of the recent literature on psychotherapy outcome has suggested that therapy is most helpful when it assists an individual in asserting control over their own life (e.g. Hackney and Cormier, 1994). Would it not seem, then, that a return to emphasis on automatic processes, in which the therapist manipulates the client’s behavior, is a step backward? For example if I as a therapist am able to

manipulate a depressed client's behavior so that he or she no longer cries, I might label my therapy a success. Yet all that I may have produced is a depressed individual with a bright smile. In particular Kirsch and Lynn's (1999) suggestion regarding "ironic processes in psychotherapy" would simply seem to be a return to the notion of reverse psychology. What use is psychotherapy to a client if we effect a minor behavioral change but fail to assist the client in developing their own agency to determine the course of their own life?

In closing it would seem most useful, both in a theoretical and pragmatic sense, for psychology as a science to set its sights forward. As scientists, we have a tendency to deny the existence of that which we can not quantify and explain. We seek out answers that are parsimonious, and in doing so, oftentimes mistakenly purport theories that are simply pat and facile. Should we not open ourselves to exploring uncharted dimensions of the human mind rather than denying their existence simply because our primitive tools are too blunt to measure them? We will only move forward if we test and push the limits of thought and technology. The well being of clients in psychotherapy may depend upon it.

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