Compatibilism(s) for Neuroscientists

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I. The Challenges to Responsibility Arising out of Neuroscience

Scientific accounts of human behavior like those sought by contemporary neuroscience challenge the idea that we can be responsible and blamable beings. Consider this recent characterization of these challenges as they are thought to emanate from the insights of contemporary neuroscience:

(T)here are scholars and theorists that some have called the “nothing butists.” Human beings are nothing but neurons, they assert. Once we understand the brain well enough, we will be able to understand behavior. We will see the chains of physical causation that determine actions. We will see that many behaviors like addiction are nothing more than brain diseases. We will see that people don’t really possess free will; their actions are caused by material possesses emerging directly out of

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nature. Neuroscience will replace psychology and other fields as the way to understand action.¹

In earlier work² I have sought to disentangle several separate strands to this enthusiastic rethinking of who we are and whether we are responsible agents.

A. The deterministic challenge that our choices are caused by factors not within the control of the chooser. The oldest of these challenges is that stemming from the insight that human choices and actions are as caused as any other natural phenomenon. This is an insight that is hardly unique to neuroscience. Virtually all academic psychologies, be they behaviorist, Freudian, genetic, or whatever, share this same insight. The common skeptical conclusion is that no one can be responsible for any choice or any action because it is unfair to blame anyone for choices or actions caused by factors outside the control of the actor. “Ought implies can,” and on this view, the causation of human choice means one cannot choose or do other than he did and so it is unfair to blame him/her.

B. The challenge that our choices are merely epiphenomenal with our actions and not the causes of those actions. The epiphenomenal challenge is distinct from the challenges that emanate from determinism.³ The challenge here is to the ability of persons to cause the objects of their willings to exist; it is not the challenge that their wills are caused by factors themselves unwilled. Neuroscience is just the latest science to issue this challenge to responsibility. Behaviorists, Freudians, introspectionists, and other academic psychologies have also long issued such an epiphenomenalist challenge to responsibility.

³ I seek to defuse the kind of epiphenomenalist challenge to responsibility coming from contemporary neuroscience in Moore, “Libet’s Challenges to Responsible Agency,” in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Lynn Nadel, eds., Conscious Will and Responsibility (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 207-234. Note that this epiphenomenalist challenge does not depend on determinism so long as it does not rely on the premise that a person can cause only if that person is uncaused in his causings.