

Pragmatics of Recognizing the Illusoriness of Free Will and Agentic Selves

Steven Zhao

Simon Fraser University

The majority of scientific and philosophic positions recognize the notion of free will as a necessary illusion that must be maintained for individual and collective functioning. Research has shown detriments in the disbelief of free will as expressed in lowered moral responsibility and greater general antisocial tendencies. However, this paper addresses that the recognition of the illusoriness of free will and agentic selfhood can promote a compassionate understanding of thoughts, reactions, and behaviours of self and others. Research has demonstrated significant positive correlations between habitual self-referential patterns/egoistic tendencies with depressive and other mood disorder related symptoms. Therefore, the recognition of causality and interdependence of the self and choices may potentially alleviate psychological and sociological dysfunctions. Psychological practices and philosophies such as mindfulness are explored as one of the individual methods for the promotion of the recognition of one's own free will. Lastly, theories of relational identity and enmeshment are addressed as potential pathways to promote the correlated characteristics of altruistic support of communal harmony and personal contentment.

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Topics and meditations on the nature of free will have roamed the intellectual and philosophical histories of our past with a pervasive fascination. When one contemplates upon the notion of free-will, one may realize that it is an experiential phenomenon that spans across all of our daily conscious experiences and collective social institutions (Harris, 2012). Historically, free will has been defined as the capacity to choose our own behaviours and decisions in life, liberated from the restraints of predetermined prophecies (Libet, 1999). Much of our historic philosophical and religious assertions explicitly reiterate this capacity as the defining characteristic of what makes us special as human beings. From our faith in free will, we may experience regret over a past mistake, confidence in a present achievement, and anxiety over a future performance. Regardless of any circumstances, we derive our conventional

“humanness” from a silent faith that we are accountable and responsible for our individual choices and behaviours. In essence, questions of free-will and agentic selfhood are deeply significant and relevant to all possible levels of living experiences and events - it is naturally a notion of freedom that is significantly meaningful for much of our existence.

However, the conventional realism and pragmatism of free will are becoming increasingly questionable through the progression of philosophical and scientific contemplations. Neuroscientists such as Sam Harris (2012) have explicitly stated that “free will is an illusion; our wills are simply not of our own making” (p. 5) and outlined the pragmatic importance in the recognition of its illusoriness. Contrary to our intuitions, perhaps it is worth the uncomfortable but honest ponderance regarding the illusoriness of free will without necessarily succumbing to the

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conclusion that we are simply meaningless automatons. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to address the pessimisms in the disbelief of free will as unnecessary and to argue that the acknowledgement and embracement of the illusoriness of free will and agentic self can lead to psychological and sociological benefits.

Neurological origins of free will

Prior to contemplating the pragmatics of the illusoriness of free will, it is only reasonable to first fully acknowledge its illusoriness in spite of our common intuitions. An illusion is defined as “a false appearance, a belief that does not have correlates in the physical world” (Modell, 2008). To our scientific knowledge, much of our mundane conscious experiences are predicated upon cognitive illusions that maintain stable and functional paradigms for conventional living (Wegner, 2005). We may conceptually understand the existence of grass through its visuals and fragrance as “green” and “fresh”. However, the conceptual constructions of “greenness” and “freshness” are nonetheless derived from packets of photon and waves of chemical vapour that are neurologically processed and synthesized into emergent realities (Zeki, 1993). These realities are meaningful and “real” within our subjective experiences; nevertheless, they speak to the powers of neuropsychological constructions of subjective perceptions that demonstrate our abilities of interpreting the nature of reality. For instance, Libet (1999) conducted a series of experiments that demonstrated the neurological activations that constitute our cognitive and decisional processes, far precedes our conscious awareness of our own decisions by approximately 350-400 milliseconds. Libet’s experimental methodology involved having the participants equipped with EEG electrode nodes as to observe and to record neural electrical activities through cognitive and motor processes. Participants were then asked to perform simple motor actions such

as pressing a button or moving a finger while being visually exposed to a moving oscilloscope timer in front of them. They were instructed to initiate motor actions whenever they experienced the “conscious urge” to do so, and to record the specific mark of time on the oscilloscope in which they felt indicative of the start of their subjective experience of a “free-willed” drive to move. The experiment observed that “readiness potential” (accumulating neural electrical activities preceding motor acts) occurs approximately 550 milliseconds before an action is performed. However, it was also recorded that participants indicated the start of their felt awareness of the initial intention to act began approximately 350-400 milliseconds after the occurrence of readiness potential (Libet, 1999). Therefore, the result demonstrates that awareness of initial intention occurred after the already concluded presence of a “neurological decision” itself. This study was replicated by other researchers such as Soon et al. (2002) and has since expanded the knowledge of the preceding rate of unconscious neural forces to be up to 10 seconds before individuals were aware of their decisions. These experimental conditions may not represent universal contexts and neurological processes; however, one cannot deny that it is evidenced as fact that neurological processes do precede respective awareness in some instances, if not all. Therefore, contrary to folk intuitions on the realness of conscious wills, numerous experimental results would reveal the uncomfortable but honest truth otherwise.

Ultimately, recent neurological studies inspire a reawakening of the contemplations of philosophical stances on the existence of free will. Contemporary experimental methodologies along with advanced technologies for scientific investigation naturally expand our perceptual understanding and vicinity into the nature of reality. Specifically, understandings of phenomena are redefined through the scientific insights of physical materialism and the physical

laws that govern physiological and neurological systems such as our bodies and minds. It is this undeniable causal relation within our physical and mental reality that inspires a redefinition of the age-old philosophical position of the origin of our choices and the degree to which we have free will. This is not to endorse the insights of physical materialism as the dominion of ontological conclusions, as subjectivity and phenomenology are facets of experiences that cannot be necessarily objectively reduced into biological processes and causalities (Schwartz & Begley, 2002). However, even if one considers the epistemological approaches of personal investigations of subjective experiences, the notion of freedom of conscious choices still remains inapplicable.

Social and cognitive origins of free will

Upon the reflection of anyone's life history, factors such as genetics, gender, culture, familial atmospheres, and numerous other historical micro and macro conditions that contribute to the formation of our existence could not have possibly been under our control. Therefore, subjective experiences of knowledge, opinions, and ideas cannot exist without prior frameworks of reference. Ultimately, although our phenomenology is inherently valuable to our subjective experiencing, it would allow no more space for personal freedom than what is previously known and unpredictably exposed to our minds. Furthermore, if one attempted to maintain careful attention to any object of interest (the content of this paper, for instance), one would immediately realize the difficulty to sustain full concentration without the occasional arising of thoughts, memories, fantasies, or other states of mental distraction. Thoughts simply arise in consciousness without much prior conscious deliberation and may sometimes even overwhelm us with their excessive ramblings and irrelevant judgments (Epstein, 2004). Furthermore, even if one intentionally processes

information and actively deliberates a "conscious" decision, how does one explain the origin of the mental commentaries that put forth the preferences and finalization of the decision? Does an individual truly have the capacity to process every single possible decisional outcome within the universe? Or are one's preferences and decisions inevitably defined by what is only known previously, which are substantiated by preceding unpredictable and coincidental exposures to certain environments and events. Therefore, only two explanations may account for the arrivals of decisions and choices – spontaneous emergences with unknown precursors or known precursors that justify the logic of causality. In either case, the logic of free-will remains inapplicable. As Harris (2012) succinctly states: "You cannot think a thought before you think it".

Free will and its moral implications

Despite the growing philosophical and scientific consensus for the conclusion that our experience of free will is a neurological illusion, numerous scholars hold the position that it is a necessary illusion that must be maintained for the sake of individual well-being and collective order (Metzinger, 2003; Vonasch & Baumeister, 2013; Wegner, 2005). For instance, social psychologist Daniel Wegner defends the position in supporting the necessity of free-will illusion for the maintenance of what he calls an "authorship emotion" (Wegner, 2005, p.30). Specifically, every act of behaviour and decision under the experience of the authorship or free will maintains the feeling of individual distinctiveness. The feeling of distinctiveness allows individual agents to experientially acknowledge the difference between events initiated by one's self, others, and external environments (Wegner, 2005). In addition, concerns regarding individual morality and ethics in association with the absence of free will have also been raised through various experimental implications. For

instance, Baumeister et al. (2009) conducted an experiment where subjects were primed with “non-free-willist” statements (i.e., “Everything is caused by preceding forces”) and are tested on attitude checklists emphasizing moral characteristics. Their results have shown a positive correlation between a disbelief in free will and maladaptive behaviours such as dishonesty, irresponsibility, and indifference to moral standards. Therefore, the research concludes that individuals may increase their antisocial inclinations as “attitudes of passivity, indifference and...disregard for moral responsibility” may be promoted (Baumeister et al., 2009 p. 743).

However, individuals who relish in the lightened burden of less personal responsibilities may still be intuitively approaching situations with a free willed paradigm. If the individual truly disbelieves in free will, then all external and internal phenomena would be perceived under the paradigm of causality and predetermination. Therefore, if all matters are either predetermined, impersonal, or both, then experiences such as feeling responsibility, guilt, and the desire to escape such burdening reminders will be nullified as irrelevant and inapplicable. This does not imply that such individuals are irresponsible by default or unaccountable for their actions, but that the justification of the lack of responsibility in the disbelief of free will does not apply because notions such as responsibility or guilt would then become irrelevant as conceptual entities themselves. In other words, non-free-willists would not attempt to justify immoral inclinations through the desire to gain agentic freedom from guilt-charged burdens of moral responsibilities simply because notions of responsibility and guilt do not apply in a consciousness without the belief in free will. Therefore, experimental conclusions such as Baumeister et al. (2009) most likely cannot be interpreted as reliable insights into the nature of the disbelief in free will as

observed individuals may simply be justifying immoral inclinations through a remaining sense of free will and agency.

The pragmatics of the recognition of the illusoriness of free will

It is quite possible, however, to recognize the illusoriness of free will with achievable prosocial benefits, despite experimental implications on the detriments in disbelief of free will. A true acknowledgement of the illusoriness of free will would generate greater capacity for compassion, well-being, and thoughtful understanding towards one’s self and others in general (Harris, 2012). Consider the case of any psychopathic serial killer. Upon reflection of their “evil” acts through the belief in their conscious wills, one may be tempted to perceive the perpetrator as deserving of a punishment that is equivalent to the suffering they have inflicted on others (Carey & Paulhus, 2012). This form of “justice” is inevitably coupled with various aversive states of disgust, hatred, and anger all supported by a belief that the convicted intentionally chose to cause undeserved suffering and is responsible for his/her actions. However, can one still condemn the psychopath under the convenient acknowledgement of a brain lesion that significantly affected their empathic capacities (Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2004)? Sensibly, the recognition of biophysical anomalies naturally dissolves our aversive states of vengeance since the effects of brain lesions represent an impersonal force that the perpetrator cannot be held accountable for. In other words, the forces represented by brain lesions are as uncontrollable and impersonal as hurricanes and earthquakes. One would not feel emotionally justified to experience vengeance towards wind or tectonic plates, unless an agency is assigned to their occurrences. Specifically, in the case of a murderer, a longitudinal tracking and investigation of the development of psychopathy reveals the impersonal and undirected forces of

genetics, familial atmospheres, and stress as analogous as successive “injuries” or “disasters” to what could have been a healthier lifestyle (Taylor, 2007).

If one were to replace one’s own determinants with that of a murderer, one would simply proceed with the exact actions without any other “choices” available in one’s mind. In other words, if one inhabited the genes, environments, and subjective experiences of an individual, one would simply be that individual. There is no separate “I” that inhabits a shell of genetic and social components, as we are the “shell” of combined influences (Zahavi, 2008). In other words, one cannot be a self by oneself. The self-emergence involves a continuous convergence of inter-subjective sharing of narrative with others and surrounding contexts, which renders the state of the self to be in constant fluidity, interchange-ability, and evolution (Zahavi, 2008). Therefore, one does not have a self in the same sense as having a static entity such as a heart or a nose (Taylor, 1989). In this sense, the acknowledgement of the lack of free will within behaviours naturally renders notions of justice with its aversive states as misdirected and unnecessary. Instead, wholesome and supportive experiences of compassion and understanding represent sensible orientations with more inclinations towards restorative/treatment programs rather than punitive models of justice in the recognition of an unfortunate positioning of the individual’s life (Harris, 2012). This does not imply that dangerous criminals would be granted freedom on the basis of provisions of unconditional forgiveness and forgetfulness, rather, perpetrators would simply be perceived as unfortunate forces of nature that society needs to be protected from and as results of causality that can be pragmatically and compassionately treated (Harris, 2012).

Implications for mental health

Similarly, this type of understanding of causality can be applicable in all facets of subjective experiences for further psychological benefits. Ruminations and self-judgments of past regrets, remorse, and guilt would be intuitively less impactful if past events are fully recognized as uncontrollably determined and accepted as such (Schwartz & Begley, 2002). Consequently, one proceeds to perceive one’s and others’ conditions as “ideal” and the only condition as individuals could not have chosen to react, behave, think, and feel otherwise on the basis of all considered causal factors (Epstein, 2004). Therefore, maladaptive thoughts and emotions no longer represent mental irritants of one’s own defects that must be aversively resisted and suppressed, but can be perceived with equanimity and compassion as natural impersonal mental phenomena simply reflective of the process of causality. In relation, studies have expanded the correlations between certain perceptual paradigms and mood disorders such as depression and generalized anxiety disorder with implications concerning the maladaptive consequences of the belief of a volitional self. Specifically, Desseilles et al. (2012) present a model that describes diagnoses of depression to be associated with greater activations of self-referential thoughts. In other words, depressive symptoms are observed to be caused and mediated through a negative self-referential process involving the belief that proximate negative outcomes and responses are attributed to one’s own defects and experienced as personally accountable. Therefore, a perceptual bias arises for the deserving of one’s and others’ derogations upon one’s “incorrect” choices of actions, thoughts, and presence (Bargh & Tota, 1988). As a result, individuals experience significant distress, contributive to the emergence of depressive symptoms from the belief that conditions and thoughts are inherently

reflective of the accountabilities of a flawed free agent.

On the other hand, one may claim the benefit in the belief of free-will during triumphant moments of success where the attempt to claim internal credit and self-recognition are normatively justifiable. One's identity may feel experientially bolstered or even immortalized under the recognition of one's victorious efforts and efficacy. However, perhaps it is also safe to acknowledge the inherent nature of vicissitudes and transiency of all conditions and entities. Events that imply and inform self-efficacy are inevitably temporary, similar to conditions that imply the neutrality and inadequacy of the self which exist within the gaps of triumphant moments. Therefore, consider the extreme psyche where one's identity and sense of self rests entirely upon the fluctuations of ever-changing circumstances, self-concept would be defined upon the basis of instability that manifests as greater self-fragmentations and mood fluctuations (Epstein, 2004). This does not mean that the importance of self-efficacy should be disregarded as a conceptual illusion, but that the conclusion of the sense of self does not necessarily have to be derived from the brief moments of fluctuating and changing events. Paradoxically, self-efficacy and a sense of stability can be argued to be maintained through the recognition of one's causal factors and preceding conditions (Harris, 2012). Instead of perceiving external events and internal reactions as personal conclusions with the natural risk of vicissitudes, conditions can be viewed as impersonal forces that one can oversee and direct under the strategic considerations of the causalities, habits, and dispositions that inform one's life-course (Harris, 2012). Essentially, this is not to argue in full opposition of recognizing one's success, but it is to conclude that perhaps a balance should be maintained with the urges to fully define one's sense of self upon external conditions, including instances of personal success.

Practices and therapeutic approaches such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy have been demonstrated to be highly effective as direct treatments and relapse-prevention programs for mood disorders as their foundational philosophy depends upon the practitioner's capacity to recognize the impersonality of thoughts and conditions (Sharma et al., 2013). Participants of mindfulness meditation and therapies are instructed to attentively observe the nature of their thoughts without identifying with them or attempting to consciously control their process or contents. As a result, habitual mindfulness practice allows one to "de-center one's self from one's mental processes, and... be less attached to negative thoughts..." (Frewen et al., 2008, p. 772). Therefore, the effectiveness of mindfulness is not necessarily predicated upon the conventional approach of positive thinking; rather, it is derived from a change in the relationship with one's own thoughts and emotions regardless of their content. Thus, inner phenomena are perceived and accepted as impersonal forces without the necessity of asserting an independently willed agent that is damaged by personal defects (Donner, 2010).

Dysfunctions of the epistemology of free will

The philosophic orientation behind mindfulness-based therapy is ultimately founded upon the teachings of Buddhism and its contemporary interpretations. Essentially, Buddhism represents a pragmatic philosophy that recognizes the ubiquitous problem of dissatisfaction and suffering and attributes this problem to be caused by a misunderstanding of reality. Ultimately, one misunderstands reality when one perceives it on the basis of it being permanent and stable and desires it to be so (ie. life, relationships, statuses, possessions, etc.) (Neal, 2006). In addition, because we experience reality through the lens of permanence, we also experience our "selves" as permanent and stable beings, alienated from the nature and laws of the

“external” world and as agentic owners of mental and physical experiences (Donner, 2010). We approach internal and external phenomena with a misunderstood model of reality that ultimately produces experiential frictions and dysfunctions with laws of nature. Specifically, a sense of alienation pervades our consciousness that generates much of our psychological and cultural problems (Taylor, 2005). Therefore, the solution for the misunderstanding lies within a perceptual shift of consciousness that acknowledges the fluidity, interconnectivity, and causality that pervades all existence (Fontana, 1987).

The misunderstood perceptions of reality along with their detriments however, are not necessarily present across all conditions of human history. For instance, Julian Jaynes (1976) theorized that volitional consciousness and agentic paradigms rose from an increase of complex symbolic/language systems. Through the evolution of culture, information, and language, conceptions of self and agency became consolidated and conventionally legitimized. Similarly, psychologist Steve Taylor (2005) describes that collective human consciousness became “sharpened” in dualistic paradigms over the millenniums, with the natural world increasingly being perceived as the cold and alienated “external”. This perception causes us to become over-vigilant to the dangers of the external (material environments and out-groups) and overprotective of our internal and self-important existences. Consequently, a collective perceptual habit evolves into an ego-consciousness that views itself as ultimately separated from the laws and forces of the natural world. However, this rise of the independent and “freed” ego develops frictional conflicts with laws of nature because of the increasing rejection of its own connections with nature and causality itself (Watts, 1951). Therefore, seemingly mundane natural laws of change and fluidity are perceived with tremendous individual distress and collective disorder. Events such as old-age,

death, illness, and general instabilities are taken to be defects deserving of solutions, despite their events being the very reflections of our inseparation with nature.

Philosopher Alan Watts (1951) has described this alienation from causality to be indicative of personal conundrums of self-conflict in modern societies, which is composed of an excessive craving for self-expression/promotion and a simultaneous contradicting tendency for self-derogation. Specifically, individuals become alienated and conflicted with their “selves” as inner phenomena are simultaneously rejected for the evidence of our inescapable connections with nature and personally identified with that which is rejected. This type of “mind-split” is pervasively reflective of the “moral” laws of many major religions as well as mainstream abstinence cultures. The religious and cultural standard of “purity” is reflective of a self-conflicting paradigm with its expectations of achieving abstinence of body and mind. The agentic “I” experiences guilt, shame, or anger against the natural/primal “me” who simultaneously experiences restraint and imprisonment.

Implications for a holistic paradigm

If a major root cause of all conflicts is the evolved consciousness of alienation and of the independent agentic self (Taylor, 2005), then individual and collective efforts should be directed to attempt to “re-evolve” a perceptual paradigm shift (under impersonal and causal forces) that acknowledges the interconnection, interdependence, and continuous causality pervading all experiences of selfhood and agency. In other words, a new perceptual understanding of our individual narratives and identities should consist of a holistic framework inclusive of micro-meso-macro forces. In addition to a self-narrative that exclusively derives its reality from one’s own individual characteristics, unique history, and “choices,” self-concept can also expand its conceptual and experiential vicinity to include

facets of broader social surroundings. Although we are inherently defined by preceding social circumstances and physiological/neurological make-up, it does not necessarily imply a reductionism of our individual worth, nor should it be a justification for the devaluation of meaning within our lives and relations with others. Rather, awareness of causality can be a space of recognizing the inherent interdependency of our identities and narratives with the world around us. Individuality does not need to be restrictively defined by an alienated self narrative of separated agency, but can be holistically expanded to include and integrate the identities and narratives of other individuals, cultures and histories (Taylor, 2005). Therefore, the self and our sense of agency would be understood within the frameworks of contextual fluidity and reciprocated connection instead of static entities existing in separation.

This paradigm shift would activate particular levels of self-definition that would contribute to the construction of intergroup and interpersonal connections. Essentially, the self can be defined by three levels – individual (differences, uniqueness), relational (interpersonal relations), and collective (intergroup relations) (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). The activation of each level of the self is dependent upon the saliency of certain situational and attitudinal cues. In relation, cultivation and promotion of the relational and collective self have shown to be involved in reduced intergroup conflicts and increased quality of friendships in general (Morry et al., 2013). When the self is defined on the basis of connectivity and involvement in relational causalities rather than individual uniqueness and agency, a condition for self-expansion for the inclusion of others is supported (Brody et al. 2008). Specifically, when relational and collective selves are activated, other members within one's relational and collective social circle become enmeshed into one's self-definition. Others are then treated as part of one's own existence and

meaning, bridging an empathic link with other members (Brody et al. 2008).

Sensibly, individual and cultural practices should prioritize increasing the saliency of situational and attitudinal cues for the greater activation of both relational and collective self definitions. Therefore, an important step in revolutionizing social paradigms into adaptable and functional ways of existence would be to reorient individual perceptions of reality itself. This would involve the promotion of the acknowledgement of interdependence and the illusoriness of separated agentic selves. Ultimately, a holistic perceptual paradigm of individual identities, narratives, and behaviours should be emphasized as both conceptual and experiential engagements that are beneficial to the functioning of social relations with self, others, and the environment. In all, the recognition of connections and causality represent epitomizing forces of a cooperative and empathically linked humanity that can reduce suffering on both individual and collective levels.

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