



BRITISH ACADEMY

British Academy Symposium on the Freedom of the Will Saturday 3rd July 2010

There is wide interest about whether humans have freewill in a sense which makes them morally responsible for their actions, not merely among philosophers and psychologists, but among those involved in formulating and operating the criminal law, theologians, and a wide general public. The last fifty years have seen the publication of an enormous philosophical literature on the relation of mind to body, and a considerable literature on moral responsibility, all relevant to this issue. In the past few years there has also been a significant body of scientific work deriving from the pioneer studies by Benjamin Libet, on the extent to which conscious thought affects human behaviour. This symposium will bring together these strands of literature. It is open to all, and invited speakers will make their presentations comprehensible to a fairly wide public. The symposium will consist of the following three seminars, each of two hours with two 40-minute papers and a 40-minute discussion period.

09.30 *Registration and refreshments (Mall Room, first floor)*

10.10 Lecture Hall, First Floor

Introduction by **Professor Peter Simons FBA**, (Professor of Philosophy, Trinity College Dublin, chair of the Philosophy Section of the British Academy.)

10.30 First seminar. Recent Neurophysiological Work on whether intentions cause brain events.

The pioneer work of Benjamin Libet and the resulting body of experimental work over the past few years shows, according to many neurophysiologists working in the field, that our 'intentions' in no way influence which actions we perform – or at least which actions of the kind they have studied we perform. This is because a brain event occurring before the formation of any intention causes us to perform the intended action by a causal route which does not proceed through the intention – a thesis known to philosophers in its general form (that no mental events cause brain events) as 'epiphenomenalism'. This interpretation of earlier experimental results has however been the subject of philosophical criticism; and the seminar will consider whether this criticism is justified, whether it applies also to later experimental results, and what – if any- experimental results would establish that our intentions do not cause brain events and thereby our actions.

Chair: **Professor Peter Simons FBA**

Main speakers:

Professor Patrick Haggard (Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience, University College, London) will discuss the neurophysiological events that precede action,

and their contribution to the conscious experience of intention. He will consider what function, if any, conscious intention has in the generation of actions.

Dr Tim Bayne (Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Oxford, and Fellow of St Catherine's College Oxford) will offer philosophical criticism of the experiments and their interpretation.

12.30 *Lunch break*

13.15 **Second Seminar. Are our intentional actions predetermined?**

If - despite these experimental results - epiphenomenalism (in respect of intentions) is false, and so our intentions cause our actions, the issue arises whether the formation of our intentions is totally predetermined by earlier events. The answer to this will depend in part on whether mental events (including intentions) are identical to (or logically supervene on) brain events, a view known as physicalism. If physicalism is true, then there will be indeterminism in the causation of our intentions only if ordinary physical laws have the consequence that there is indeterminism in the causation of the relevant brain events. Several physicists and neurophysiologists have argued – although not as yet in any very great detail- that Quantum theory together with certain neurophysiological evidence has the consequence that there is this indeterminism. If on the other hand mental events are not identical to (and do not supervene on) brain events then – if epiphenomenalism is false - non-physical events exercise a causal influence on the brain. That has the consequence that any deterministic theory of human behaviour would have to include laws governing the interactions of intentions, beliefs etc with brain events. It looks as if it would be very difficult to construct such a theory, and if Davidson was right in his principle of the anomalism of the mental, that 'there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained', then human actions would not be totally predictable.

Chair: **Professor Roger Scruton FBA**, University of Oxford

Main Speakers:

Professor Frank Jackson FBA (Professor of Philosophy, Princeton, La Trobe University and Visiting Professor, Princeton University) will argue for a basically physicalist view and argue for what follows from it (or would follow, given certain detailed neurophysiological results and Quantum theory, as usually interpreted) for the determinism of human actions.

Professor Richard Swinburne FBA (Emeritus Professor of Philosophy of Religion, University of Oxford) will defend the view that mental events are not identical with and do not supervene on brain events and that the mental is 'anomalous', and so – if epiphenomenalism is false- that no one could show that human actions are totally predetermined.

3.15 *Refreshments, (Mall Room, first floor)*

15.35 Third Seminar. Moral Responsibility

It is however highly contentious whether it follows from our intentions not being fully caused by any previous events that we have the kind of freewill which is necessary and sufficient for moral responsibility, so that it is proper to hold us morally guilty (culpable) or morally meritorious (praiseworthy) for some of our actions. Some claim that it does follow, some claim that would follow only given that human identity is constituted by an immaterial soul (a view called 'substance dualism'), some claim that only determinism would give us moral responsibility, and some claim that the traditional concept of moral responsibility is an incoherent one.

Chair: **Professor John Broome FBA** (White's Professor of Moral Philosophy, University of Oxford)

Main Speakers:

Professor Galen Strawson (Professor of Philosophy, University of Reading) will argue that there cannot be any ultimate moral responsibility and so neurophysiological discoveries are irrelevant to his issue.

Dr Helen Steward (Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Leeds) will argue that moral responsibility requires the falsity of determinism, on the grounds that the capacity to act is a necessary condition of any moral responsibility there might be, and exercising the capacity to act involves an indeterministic variety of causality.

17.35 *Drinks Reception, (Mall Room, first floor)*