

# **How important is conscious deliberation for free will?**

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## **Introduction**

The word “consciousness” cannot be found directly in the title of my paper. There is just the adjective “conscious” and this adjective serves for a more precise determination of “deliberation”. – So the topic of this paper is conscious deliberation or decision on the one hand, and on the other it is free will. Strictly speaking, the topic is the criticism of the opinion that there is something like free will at all. This criticism is currently brought forward by neuroscientists and it attracts attention – not only among philosophers, but also among lawyers, theologians and journalists. Free will has become a much discussed topic also in journals, newspapers, with one word it is seen as a topic which concerns the society as a whole. Prominent scientists express themselves on free will and often it is given the impression that it is – for scientific reasons – no longer acceptable to believe in the possibility of free will. It is allegedly time to face the truth that our will is not free, and – that is a further conclusion – it is not legitimate to hold ourselves responsible for our actions.

Wolf Singer, who is director of the Max-Planck-Institut für Hirnforschung in Frankfurt am Main, is representatively quoted: “Our current knowledge forces the abandonment of domains which are considered to be holy, for instance the concept of free will and responsibility.”<sup>1</sup>

The aim of my contribution is to point out a certain presupposition of the criticism of free will, as it is brought forward by neuroscientific direction, and then to question these presupposition by way of trial at least. More concrete, the supposition is that the neuroscientific criticism of free will is based on a problematic identification of free will and conscious deliberation.

In the following I want to make clear the neuroscientific argumentation by means of the Libet-Experiments and others, then in a second part, it shall be showed which certain concept of free will is used by this argumentation. Thirdly, I try to criticize this certain concept of free will and finally I introduce an alternative view.

The whole attempt is based on an article by Josef Quitterer with the title “Wie viel Freiheit braucht Verantwortung? Ethische Implikationen neurowissenschaftlicher Studien.”<sup>2</sup>

## **1. Neuroscientific experiments and the criticism of free will**

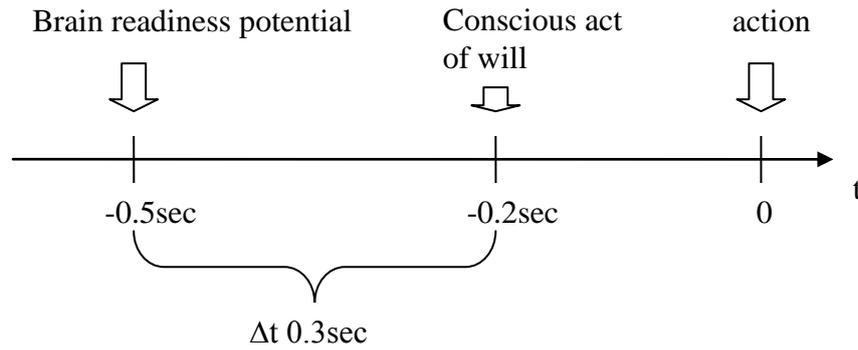
The most famous experiments in this context are the studies carried out by the American scientist Benjamin Libet. In the following they are briefly sketched out:<sup>3</sup>

Libet relies on the discovery, which was made earlier by Kornhuber and Deeke, according to that a certain activity of the brain precedes a conscious body-movement, as for instance the moving of a finger. This brain-activity turns out by a weak but measurable electric charge of certain brain areas – the so called “brain readiness potential”.

The participants of Libet’s experiments were asked to make a voluntary finger-movement, whenever they want to do so within a certain period of time. At the same time they had to notice the point of time, when they exactly felt the conscious will to move. For measure this point of time, it was necessary that the participants looked at a rotating disc, which was marked with a spot. By means of this “clock” they were able to specify exactly the point of time when they perceived the feeling that they had made the decision.

Moreover it was measured the point of time of the beginning when the brain readiness potential occurred and thirdly the point of time of the actual finger-movement. So there are three points of time altogether which were measured: The point of time of the conscious perception of the will, the point of time when the brain readiness potential is detectable, and the point of time when the finger moves.

If one lists now the temporal course of events, the following result arises: Ca. 0.2 sec before the real finger-movement, the participants felt the conscious will to move their finger. But – and this could be considered as an unexpected result – already ca. 0.7 – 0.5 sec before the movement, the brain readiness potential can be detected. That means the participants realized the decision to move the finger consciously almost half a second after the brain has initiated this movement. So the conscious will seems to limp afterwards. First there is the actual initiation of the movement, which is unconscious, and then – at least 0.3 sec afterwards – there follows the conscious will or better said the conscious perception of the will.



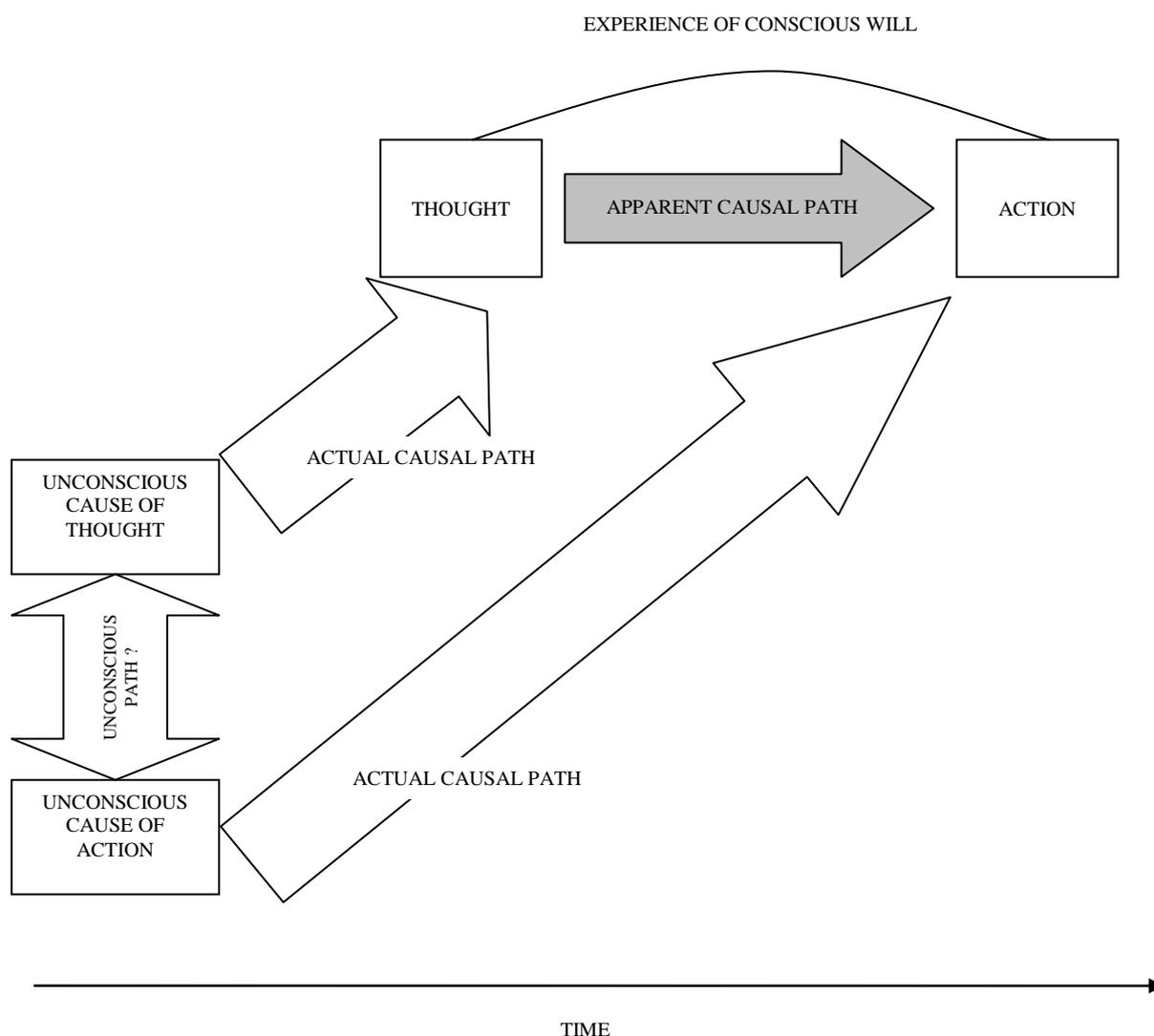
**Figure 1**  
The Libet Experiments

This result is supposed to prove – according to a common interpretation – that we have no free will. In this opinion the actual producer of our actions is the brain, whereas our consciousness has no causal influence at all. The subjective impression that we have decided on our own is based on a mistake, and freedom of the will is just an illusion. This illusion comes about, because our consciousness gets the information about how our brain has decided and misinterprets this decision as its own creation. This view becomes clearer when we have a look to the theses of Daniel Wegner.

In their article “Apparent Mental Causation”<sup>4</sup> the empirical psychologists Daniel Wegner and Thalia Wheatley show that it is possible that persons believe they have deliberately brought out something, even though they have not done anything as can be proved. As a result Wegner and Wheatley come to the conclusion, that our every-day experience of free will is based on our tendency, that we interpret a certain conscious thought as the cause for our actions. According to Wegner and Wheatley this interpretation is false, but even though it is almost unavoidable, given the following three conditions: a) Priority. That means there must be a suitable temporal relation between thought and action. “The thought should precede the action at a proper interval”.<sup>5</sup> b) Consistency. The semantic content of the thought should be compatible with the action. c) Exclusivity. It is necessary that there are no other apparent causes for the action except the conscious thought.

If these three conditions are given, we automatically interpret a conscious thought as the cause of an action, and in such a case we would say – according to Wegner – that we have intended the action and therefore our will was free.

The following figure illustrates the theory of Wegner and Wheatley:<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 2**  
 A model of conscious will  
 According to D.Wegner

In accordance with this model the actual causal paths are unconscious, whereas the apparent causal path between thought and action is consciously perceived, but not real. In that case freedom of the will is said to be an illusion because the person who acts is not aware of the actual powerful causal chains. Yet the experience of free will remains, but this experience is based on a misleading interpretation of the real causal connections.

A further experiment that could serve as a proof of the illusiveness of free will was carried out by Brasil-Neto, Pascual Leone and others.<sup>7</sup> In this experiment participants were asked to choose whether to move their right or left index finger. At the same time the motor area of one of the hemispheres of their brain was stimulated by a magnetic field. It was possible to

show that the preference to move that finger which was contralateral to the stimulated site increased. Therefore the stimulation had a marked relevant influence on the decision. In spite of this detected connection the participants continued to perceive that they had voluntarily decided.

## **2. Which is the concept of free will that is presupposed by the neuroscientific criticism?**

Critics who support the opinion that there is no free will seem to have a certain idea of what free will is like, if there is something that could be really called free will. The critical argumentation presupposes a special view of free will. According to that view free will consists in the capacity to make a conscious deliberated decision. The conscious deliberations are constitutive for the freedom of the will, since they are interpreted as the causes of our actions. According to this view, we would have free will, if some of our conscious thoughts are the relevant causes for our actions. Wolf Singer for example writes: “Obviously, we assume that motives are under control of free will, if we can lift them up into consciousness and examine them by a conscious deliberation, whereas motives which are not consciously perceptible are not subjected to the will.”<sup>8</sup> In this case the conscious weighing of reasons becomes a necessary condition for free will.

The case is very similar when we have a look to some interpretations of the Libet-experiments. If one interprets these experiments as a falsification of free will, one agrees with the opinion that in case of a wanted action a conscious thought must be the cause for this action, or rather that the action cannot be really voluntarily wanted if one can show that this action was caused by unconscious mechanisms. In the view of an exponent of such kind of criticism the participants would only act freely, if they were able to produce an action by something like a “jump of the will” or something similar. In any case a conscious mental event is necessary and that event has to take on the function of a cause for the body-movement. If one agrees with this opinion, then and only then it makes sense to say that the empirical fact that unconscious processes of the brain precede both – conscious thoughts and body-movements – disprove the possibility of free will.

In the same way free will is identified with a conscious decision by some interpretations of the studies of Brasil-Neto, and others. Finally, the contribution of Wegner and Wheatley is very revealing in this context. In this case as well, “will” stands for a conscious thought that

chronologically precede an action and that is interpreted as the cause for this action. Against the background of this opinion the evidence that there is no real cause-effect-relation between thought and action becomes consequently a proof for the ineffectiveness of the will.

To sum it up it can be said that all these criticisms of free will are based on the opinion that free will must be interpreted as a conscious, mental event or state which acts as a cause for a body-movement. Josef Quitterer calls this opinion the “paradigm of mental causation”<sup>9</sup> and he asks whether this paradigm is really qualified to express our every-day convictions of free will and responsibility.

### **3. How valid is the identification of free will with conscious deliberation?**

Undoubtedly consciousness and the human capacity to deliberate play an important role for free will. But is it really necessary that in every case a conscious decision has to precede a wanted action? This claim seems to be too strong. Day in, day out we all act and want many things, whereas conscious deliberations are carried out relatively seldom by us. The collecting and proving of reasons pro and contra is not a necessary condition neither for acting nor for wanting. We can imagine many cases where conscious deliberations may be missing, but we still would speak of voluntary actions.

For example, this morning I brushed my teeth. Even though no conscious decision preceded this action, I would maintain that I wanted and intended this action, and furthermore I could hold responsible for it, if the occasion should arise. On no account the action “brushing my teeth” was just an incident that happened to me. By way of contrast the incident that I swallowed the wrong way, when I trunk a cup of coffee this morning, was an incident that just happened to me. This incident was completely unintentional.

If it is true, that the concept “wanted action” does not necessarily include conscious deliberations, then the conclusions of critics like Singer and others who refer to neuroscientific experiments are hasty. The examination whether a consciously perceived mental state has any causal influence to a chronologically following body-movement or not, this examination searches for free will at the wrong place.

### **4. Is there an alternative to the “paradigm of mental causation”?**

The paradigm of mental causation suffers from the assumption that free will could be found at certain discrete points of human life. "Will" is seen as an isolated quantity which is able to intervene by its own in the course of life at certain points, and that independently of other factors. Based on such a view of will, freedom can be queried by the results of empirical studies indeed. In everyday life we take a different view. Since our everyday view of will is not as strong and not as artificial – in a certain sense – as the paradigm of mental causation supposes, we should search for an alternative view: A view which do not only express better our everyday intuitions, but also is able to integrate neurobiological findings.

Josef Quitterer describes such an alternative by referring to Karl Rahner and Aquinas, but also to the works of the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio.<sup>10</sup> Finally I want to mention briefly this approach. The central point is that freedom is not seen as something which belongs to a will that is isolated from other personal capabilities, but as something that refers to the person as a whole. Freedom is not realized in singular acts of a mental will, but in the life story of a person, and that means in the teamwork of many factors, conscious and unconscious ones like convictions, values, aims, desires, habits, traits and emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> „Unser heutiges Wissen zwingt uns zur Preisgabe für heilig gehaltener Domänen, etwa des Konzepts des freien Willens und der Verantwortlichkeit“. W. SINGER in *Bild der Wissenschaft* 3/2003. 32.

<sup>2</sup> J. QUITTERER: *Wie viel Freiheit braucht Verantwortung? Ethische Implikationen neurowissenschaftlicher Studien*. In: *Zeitschrift für medizinische Ethik* 52 (2006). 45-56.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. B. LIBET: *Haben wir einen freien Willen?* In: Ch. GEYER (ed.): *Hirnforschung und Willensfreiheit. Zur Deutung der neuesten Experimente*. Suhrkamp 2004. 268-289.

<sup>4</sup> D. WEGNER / T. WHEATLEY: *Apparent Mental Causation*. In: *American Psychologist* 54 (1999). 480-492.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 483.

<sup>6</sup> This figure is taken from D. WEGNER: *The illusion of conscious will*. 68.

<sup>7</sup> I refer to the description presented by Wegner and Wheatley in: D. WEGNER / T. WHEATLEY: *Apparent Mental Causation*. In: *American Psychologist* 54 (1999). 481-482.

<sup>8</sup> „Wir gehen offenbar davon aus, daß Motive, die wir ins Bewußtsein heben und einer bewußten Deliberation unterziehen können, dem freien Willen unterworfen sind, während Motive, die nicht bewußtseinsfähig sind, offenbar nicht dem freien Willen unterliegen.“ W. SINGER: *Verschaltungen legen uns fest: Wir sollten aufhören, von Freiheit zu sprechen*. In: Ch. GEYER (ed.): *Hirnforschung und Willensfreiheit. Zur Deutung der neuesten Experimente*. Suhrkamp 2004. 30-65.

<sup>9</sup> „Das Paradigma der mentalen Verursachung“. J. QUITTERER: *Wie viel Freiheit braucht Verantwortung? Ethische Implikationen neurowissenschaftlicher Studien*. In: *Zeitschrift für medizinische Ethik* 52 (2006). 49.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 50-55.