



## **Philosophy, Psychology, Neuroscience, and Free Will (ASEM)**

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### **Assignment Context**

This assignment is from my ASEM entitled “Philosophy, Psychology, Neuroscience, and Free Will”. The seminar introduces students to the topic of human freedom from the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience. Prior to completing this assignment, through the assigned readings and the conversations in the classroom, students have begun to consider the following line of thought: if everything that you do and have ever done is the inevitable byproduct of political, social, economic, cultural, psychological, and neurological forces at work within and around you, in what sense could you be free and morally accountable for your actions? When our actions are situated within this broader context, it seems unlikely that our desires, preferences, choices, decisions, intentions, plans, values, and commitments can make any difference to what happens, can push back against the world, affecting real and genuine change. By asking students to engage with a provocative text by the neuroscientist Benjamin Libet and at least two other works that we read during the term, the assignment requires students to write an argumentative essay in which they present and defend their own opinion on the question of whether recent neuroscientific data does, in fact, undermine the existence of free will.

### **Assignment Prompt**

Among the educated public, it is a widespread assumption that human beings have free will and that when we act with free will, we are morally accountable for what we do. In his recent work, the neuroscientist Benjamin Libet has challenged this assumption, claiming that our actions are ultimately the result of neurological factors that are beyond our control, likely rendering us unworthy of praise or blame. Based on your reading of at least two other texts that we have encountered this quarter, would you agree with Libet’s view about free will and moral accountability? If so, why? If not, how should we think about these issues?

Using the texts by Libet and at least two other authors, write an eight-page argumentative essay answering this question. Assume that you are writing an academic paper for an audience of undergraduate students at a national philosophy conference. Assume further that your audience has not read any of the material, but they were drawn to your talk because of its intriguing title. The introduction of your essay should explain the problem and outline your thesis statement and supporting argument as a response. The rough draft of your essay is due May 11.

### **My Hopes and Dreams**

Through writing this assignment, my hope was that students would achieve and demonstrate a number of things. First, that they would achieve an understanding of their own beliefs about this challenging topic and the reasons that support these beliefs, and demonstrate this by clearly asserting a claim and supporting this claim with reasons and evidence. Second, that they would achieve an understanding of the claims, evidence, and reasoning presented by Libet, and demonstrate this understanding by clearly describing, in their own words, what Libet claimed and why. Third, that they would select appropriate texts to support or counter Libet's argument, and demonstrate this by clearly describing the arguments articulated within these texts and by describing, as precisely as possible, exactly how the claims, evidence, and arguments presented in those texts either support or counter Libet. Fourth, that they would achieve an understanding of the way(s) in which their chosen texts support their own opinion, and demonstrate this by articulating the evidential relations that exist between their thesis statement and the claims, evidence, and arguments presented by the texts they've selected. Last, but not least, that they would present an argument that was at least intelligible and coherent, if not insightful and original, and demonstrate this through prose that clearly displays the depth of their knowledge of the subject matter and the relevant texts, through indicators like editing, formatting, proper use of source materials and evidence, argumentative structure, voice, and style.

### **Student Strategies**

Although to varying degrees of success, a significant majority of students used similar strategies and approaches when writing their essays. I believe this similarity was due in large measure to the assignment prompt and the scaffolding exercises I assigned prior to their writing of the final draft. The assignment prompt asked students to assume that they are writing an academic essay for an audience of fellow undergraduates at a national philosophy conference, where the audience has not read any of the material but were drawn to their talk because of its captivating title. The prompt requested that the introduction of their essay clearly articulate the problem addressed and outline their thesis statement and supporting argument. In addition to the guidance provided by the prompt, prior to their writing of the final draft, students completed three scaffolding exercises. The first took place early on during the term, when I gave students an in-class workshop on the basic mechanics of philosophical argumentation, including a lengthy discussion of my hopes for the assignment. The second exercise was an outline, which included a brief summary of their thesis statement, argument, and their chosen textual evidence in support of their argument, as well

as a short bibliography. I held individual conferences with students to review and discuss their outlines. After completing their rough draft and receiving detailed written feedback from me, students completed the third exercise, which was an in-class peer-review workshop, guided by instructions that we discussed beforehand.

The two examples included here are the introductory paragraphs from the final drafts of two student essays. Since the assignment prompt explicitly asked students to articulate the problem addressed by their essays and outline their thesis statement and supporting argument in the introduction, and because, in both cases, the introductions demonstrate the quality of editing, formatting, proper use of source materials and evidence, argumentative structure, voice, and style found in the remainder of the essay, they serve as useful tools for learning from student writing.

### **Student Writing #1**

#### The Illusion of Free Will: An Evolutionary Perspective

The debate over the concept and existence of free will can be found among the earliest philosophical literature and universally within theology. It has large implications not only for the nature of humanity and consciousness, but also for the universe itself. Our society is, to a large extent, built on the assumption that we do have free will; within the legal and criminal systems individuals are punished under the assumption that they had control over their actions, within the school system students are educated and taught under the assumption that intelligence or knowledge is flexible, and, more broadly, society is built on a system in which people hold others accountable and responsible both for their merits and their failures. Discovery of a lack of free will would have large scale implications for the foundations on which society is built, while proof of the presence of free will would require large changes in the fields of anthropology, evolutionary biology, physics, and many other fields of inquiry which are based on the idea that the world is solely physical and no greater than the sum of its parts. Within the realm of the free will debate, one of the most noted and referenced explanations for the argument against free will is the 'Consequence Argument', originally published by Peter van Inwagen. According to van Inwagen, if determinism were to be true, there would be only one possible outcome at every

instant (191), indicating that humans have no power to change the course of events. The consequence argument relies on the laws of nature being defined and unchangeable, though van Inwagen makes no claims as to what these laws are. This paper will further specify that laws of nature include the theories of evolutionary biology. The consequence argument denies the existence of free will even though many individuals report the experience of free will as a counterargument. This, too, can be explained by evolutionary biology, as an evolutionarily adaptive illusion to help explain the world. Given that all of the moments in history and the path of evolution have created the world as such at the present moment, given that the future is shaped by the past, and given that the laws of nature cannot change, applying the laws of nature to the state of the world in the present moment can result in only one possible outcome: the state of the world at the next moment as it occurs. It is evolutionarily advantageous nonetheless to believe that we have power to some degree over the world in which we live but this is simply an illusion, an adaptive mechanism to help us understand the world around us. Adjusting the consequence argument to include evolutionary biology, there is no free will but it is adaptive for man to believe that there is.

### **Analysis of Student Writing #1**

Student #1 includes much by way of analytical detail but her writing is not very concise, precise, or well organized, as evinced by the sheer length of her introductory paragraph, and the fact that it opens with a sweeping and unfounded generalization about the debate, including unspecified implications that are neither very useful nor very informative. Although the three examples of the ways in which society is built on the assumption that we have free will are compelling, Student #1 mentions further potential implications without providing examples to assist the reader in understanding her point. During the opening four sentences, Student #1 brings up a number of interesting but not clearly related notions – evolutionary biology, physics, history, theology, and philosophy – and doesn't introduce and define these concepts. Moreover, the transition to the work of Peter van Inwagen is abrupt. Her reason for doing so only becomes apparent about five sentences later, when she attempts to introduce her thesis. When doing so, she struggles to clarify the fact that she is going to assume the truth of Peter van Inwagen's argument, while not explicitly mentioning the work of Libet or the additional text(s) with which she will engage. This suggests a failure to carefully engage with the assignment prompt.

## Student Writing #2

### Free Will: A Middle-Ground Approach

For centuries the topic of free will has been at the center of intense debate among academics. Recently, top scholars in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience have questioned its existence and come to many different conclusions. Roderick Chisholm, a prominent American philosopher from Brown University, has argued that we, as agents, can indeed be the cause of our actions. In contrast, psychologist Daniel Wegner of the University of Virginia (and later Harvard University) argues that our freedom to choose is only an illusion. Clearly, the philosophical community is divided on the issue, and psychologists and neuroscientists are no closer to a consensus. Benjamin Libet claimed to show that our decisions are preceded by unconscious impulses; this assertion spurred a long line of research centered on lightning-quick brain impulses occurring before an action takes place. The results of this research remain inconclusive, as one could use them to support or deny the existence of free will. In this paper, I will attempt to show why research to date on the topic of free will is not strong enough to support a conclusion either in favor of or against its existence. If anything, the most defensible claim that can be made from philosophical and scientific research is that free will exists to a degree, but only to a degree. Until the body of research can show definitely that free will does or does not exist, this is the only appropriate position to be taken. Furthermore, I will show that a significant amount of previous research actually does offer support for the possession of what I will call *incomplete free will*.

### Analysis of Student Writing #2

Student #2 carefully introduces the philosophers and psychologists with whom he is working, but seems to have trouble providing similar context for Libet and the conversation happening within the field of neuroscience as a result of Libet's work. After introducing his interlocutors, Student #2 provides a clear and concise thesis statement, one that reflects a balanced assessment of the relevant literature. In the final sentence, he coins a key term – “incomplete free will” – that makes clear the purpose and structure of the remainder of the essay. Although by the end of the essay the student succeeds in tracing “incomplete free will” through the disciplines of neuroscience and philosophy, he does not make this clear to

the reader of the introduction, which is unfortunate. Otherwise, this is a strong introductory paragraph, demonstrating the quality of editing, formatting, proper use of source materials and evidence, argumentative structure, voice, and style found in the remainder of the essay.

### **Going Forward**

In their own ways and to differing degrees of achievement, the essays produced in response to this assignment met the five desiderata noted above. Thus, in general, I was satisfied with the responses that I received and the extent to which I made clear my expectations for the assignment. The next time I offer this assignment, though, I shall change the instruction and scaffolding that I provide, in two ways. First, during the in-class workshop on the basic mechanics of philosophical argumentation, I will include model student essays as a teaching tool, particularly to help students understand how to shape an introduction, how to put texts in conversation with each other, and how to make clear the distinction between a student's presentation of other writers' ideas and their analysis of these other writers' ideas. Second, during our individual conferences I will ask that students bring a complete draft of their introduction, in addition to outlining their thesis statement, argument, and textual evidence. Together, we shall read their introduction and assess the extent to which it succeeds in meeting the standard set by the model essay. Doing so should, with any luck, help students to better understand the kind of writing that they are aiming to produce in the remainder of their essay.

