

*Student conference:*

## **The Freedom of Mind**

*In this issue, we open up the floor for discussion asking the question “How free is our mind?” In a meeting between Master students of Social Psychology and Neuroscience at the VU, questions like “Do we have Free Will? or What are the constraints on Free Will?” brought about a hot dispute that we would like to share with our readers. To initiate the talk, Victoria presented two common opposite answers to this question:*

*Victoria:* On one hand, Free Will is just the result of our biological programming and simple learning experiences. We think and react to situations as our instincts shaped our mind. On the other hand, we can also assume that humans have a will of their own, are capable of making choices, and creating their own destiny. Not every human thinks the same way, and chooses the same action.

*Lotte:* My answer is neither of these two. The environment has influence on our behaviours. Humans are capable of processing a lot of information at the same time. What we are capable of is to take into account many different things at the same time. Not everything is determined by the genes, but also by learning experiences. It's a bi-directional process.

*Wilco:* In my opinion, Free Will is an illusion. We make it up to have a sense of control. All things humans do are triggered by the environment. Take emotions for example. We constantly scan the environment for dangers and opportunities. Emotions are fortunately automatic processes. If we had to consciously think about how to respond to everything, we'd end up dead. Much of our behaviours are instigated beyond control but we like to think that we are in control. We come up with the concept of Free Will as a post-hoc explanation, or attribution for what we did. It gives a sense of safety to think that we are in control of our own lives. In a broad sense, our illusion of control is to reduce anxiety. It is frightening thinking that you can't control what will happen in the future. For example, you don't want another person to throw your dice in the monopoly game because it will take away your feeling of control.

*Lotte:* Why would we like to think that we are in control if it is not the case? May be we should come back to the definition of Free Will?

*Gijs:* As I understand, Wilco defines Free Will as being God of your own world? We cannot influence how the dice will roll. That is not Free Will. Free Will is being capable of making one's own choices and thereby creating one's own destiny, choosing one option among all the possibilities.

*Gerald:* I agree that Free Will is about knowing which options are available out there and making the choice.

*Gijs:* Free Will is not creating the options, or changing the environment. It is making the choice.

*Wilco:* But people are influenced by very subtle contextual cues in making decision and this undermines Free Will. In an experiment, when the participants are primed with a certain stimulus, they are more likely to choose a certain respond over the others, it

means that your freedom to give a certain answer is very much restricted by subtle contextual influence.

*Lotte:* I wonder if we actually have multiple choices in a decision. One decision only leads to one outcome, and it's impossible to live exactly the same moment again to redo the decision and experience another outcome. There is always one option more prominent than the other. Therefore, I doubt the definition of Free Will as freedom of choice.

*Kaska:* In an experiment by James Shah, he showed that people who are primed with the names of a significant other performed better on a cognitive task afterward, and people who were primed with a name of a person who was not supporting their goal were distracted. All these influence of the others may be outside your consciousness. You may say that people have Free Will because they have freedom of choice, but I think sometimes we don't have any choice at all.

*Sylvia:* Sometimes freedom is not only about choosing one of two choices, but also about the attitude of not wanting to make a choice. Do we always want to make a choice?

*Lotte:* Choices can be how to act, but also whether to act or not to act. Not making an action is also a choice, so I don't see it makes any difference to this discussion.

*At this moment the discussion shifted to the function of Free Will.*

*Janina:* Considering the Free Will in terms of making a choice doesn't really give us a view of its functions. Just an example: The other day, my boyfriend told me about an article he read on human love, which talked about some evolutionary aspects of love. He was completely enraged about reading that his behavior should be basically determined by hormones and evolutionary fitness. He just shut up some kind of protection wall, because somehow his "romantic idea of love" was suddenly shattered by this scientific research. It is similar with the Free Will. The function of Free Will is to make you feel good and competent and that's why you protect it.

*Nina:* Free Will does not only provide emotional protection, but another function of Free Will is also propelling actions. If you think, oh, you don't have any choice anyway, and you are under the influence of the environment and it doesn't make any difference whatever you do, you may fall into depression, and ask yourself why would we act at all.

*Wilco:* And that's why people created the illusion of Free Will!

*Gerald:* What makes you (*Nina*) think that if we don't have Free Will, we will all be depressed? Because at least I am a disbeliever in Free Will and I am not depressed.

*Everyone laughed.*

*Nina:* I admit that I still have some choices, but since we are under so many influences, I prefer to think that I can make conscious choices in whatever way I want to.

*Gerald:* The decision making process occurs in the brain. Sometime you can control this process, and sometimes you don't know why such a choice is made.

*Lannie:* And whether you can make a choice or a decision or not is not your Free Will, because there is always an urge in ourselves to survive, and you are forced to make choices to maintain yourselves.

*Nina:* Well, but I'd like to believe that it's me who makes the decision...

*Many voices:* It is you...

- Gijs:* It is still you. Only that you can't control the decision making process (*many voices laugh*) but the decision is still yours.
- Kaska:* Coming back to the reason why do you feel depressed when you think that you have no Free Will. Because most of your decision arrive from something else... like situation constraints etc. But, if you think there is always something that helps you to make the decision, in a way isn't it very liberating?
- Gijs:* Even though you know that you are influenced by so many factors, the fact that you still can make some choices will keep you from being depressed. But if you cannot make any choice for some reasons, then you are depressed. So it is not the situational constraint per se, but the restriction of choice is what makes you unhappy.
- Lotte:* It's strange but too much knowledge also makes you unhappy. You are aware of a lot of causes of your actions, and you know you can't control all of them.
- Wilco:* I agree. Research on consumer's behavior suggests that people who have to choose from too few kinds of bread are unhappy. On the other hand, people who have to choose from too many kinds of bread are also confused and unhappy as well.
- Victoria:* I just wonder, in cases when you have too many choices, how preferable Free Will is?
- Kaska:* It seems to me like the desire is higher when there is constraint. When you know that you don't have any control on your own fate, when there is obstacle that deprives you the freedom of choices, then you desire for Free Will. Of course the fact that you have no choice makes you unhappy, but if you have too many choices and don't know what to choose you are also unhappy. For example, in the Western world, you have so much freedom, so many options that they just don't know what to do about it. So much freedom actually makes you not free anymore to make any decision. Probably people then desire for some guidance.
- Janina:* If you have too many options you also cannot make the perfectly right decision, because you never know about all options. You have only a limited amount of time and energy to consider the options, and at one point you just stop weighing them against each other.
- Nina:* I also think of the possibility that you actually don't really know what you want anymore, and therefore you cannot make the right choice for yourself. Then maybe Free Will is not so good for us.
- Lotte:* If you don't know about certain choices you can make, maybe you won't be depressed, but if you know there are certain options that you cannot choose, then you are depressed.
- Lannie:* Maybe the point is that you can't choose what you want. Your desire is determined by something else beyond you and beyond your influence.
- Perhaps, the definition of Free Will may not reside only the ultimate control over your behavior, but the degree of control available to us under all those constraints of freedom.*
- Linh:* In the philosophical argument of the First Mover (*by Aquinas*), you are moved by something, and you can always move something yourself. If you seek to be the First Mover, you only disappoint yourself. But if I understand Gerald correctly, then Free Will is not about whether you have freedom or not, but the degree of freedom you have. To certain extent you still have the freedom to choose the best option for

yourself. Take an example, altruistic actions is not the best decision for the self, it's actually against the principle of self-interest and self-perseverance. Why would a Tutsi woman save the baby of her enemy if the lives of herself and her family are threatened by this action?

*Gerald:* Maybe she acted according to the motherly instinct to protect a youngster? Babies look weak and cute so that mothers love and protect them. This is a basic instinct, and it is probably not a conscious choice.

*Wilco:* There are a couple of different explanations. One is that empathy is an automatic process. Therefore, when you see somebody in danger, you automatically have the intention to save them. Another explanation is reciprocity. If you save a baby, the action kind of makes you into a hero and it can give you different future rewards, like "some body else will save my baby next time". There is an argument that all altruism in the end is egoism. For example, if you let the baby die, you may feel so guilty for the rest of your life. The guilt prevention can be considered as very close to a moral judgment, but in fact it is egoistic.

*Gerald:* I don't think this woman takes these arguments into account when she made such a decision. She might just act as she was appealed at the moment. If you act according to your biological programming, it is very different from learning all the options and then making a choice.

*Gijs:* I believe it is the biological makeup, such as babies have round and cute faces so that the mothers love and save them.

*Lotte:* But not every mother takes the same decision in the same situation. I think making a decision is not always biological reflexes, but like an on-and-off behavior. It is related to a much more complex information processing system. But both (*biological reflexes and calculating decision*) are under strong influence of environmental cues and I don't see it make any difference to the existence of Free Will.

*Gerald:* Because making a decision by weighing gains and losses is some kind of calculation, while biological behaviors are under the principle of evolution. A person is pushed into action by biological programming, but he can choose different actions according to his calculation.

*Lotte:* If I got it right, then you are saying that economical reasoning is much more an expression of the Free Will?

*Gerald:* Kind of.

*Gijs:* Maybe we have to accept that we have Free Will within some boundary. We cannot suppress all the influences; we have to choose among so many things. And actually our biological makeup protects us, protects our survival. Among many things that go on, you have to choose certain things, and within those options you have the freedom to choose. The point is, the more aware you are of the influences on your decision, the less Free Will you may have. And for some other people, because they don't realize those constraints, they still think they have the freedom to choose whatever they want.

*Then the question seems to focus on how to expand the degree of our freedom.*

*Lotte:* I think it has to do with the individual (*and momentary*) experience of Free Will. There are moments we do have the feeling that we have control on many things.

*Linh:* So what do you think about us manipulating those environmental influences to give us more freedom? For example, we learn about the effects of colors on our mood, and we deliberately paint our room in blue to calm ourselves down? So on one hand we are under situational constraints, on the other hand we make use of them.

*Lotte:* But there are also unconscious influences, relating to unconscious processes. For example, in the experiment with free associations, unconscious prime (subliminal prime) leads to a different result with conscious prime. The fact that you deliberately manipulate the environment makes it work on the conscious level and the effect is different from that on the unconscious level.

*Linh:* I still think if we know what limits our freedom of choice, we probably have a better chance to improve it. Like the metaphor of the Cave by Plato, we humans are in a dark cave and we don't know the way out, but at least when we admit that we are in a cave, we can start searching for a way out.

*Lotte:* But what is out there? (*lots of laughs*)

*Linh:* I don't know, but if we don't try to get out, we will never know!

*Lannie:* I'm only afraid we can never escape. For example, with the color effect, we may be able to manipulate it, but the fact is that we still can never escape the effect.

*Gerald:* My general opinion is that there is no Free Will, so we actually cannot choose what to think of. You don't have any influence on your brain, on the chemicals in your brain.

*Gijs:* I agree. In most situations the brains determined certain rules, the way you make the choice, the way you act. But sometimes your brain chooses the bumpy road, or even gets stuck, and you can't do much about it. I want to feel happy even when something bad happens to me, but I can't. I also always feel good when I finish a task. That effect of reward is something you can't change either. You don't have Free Will in that sense.

*Kaska:* In my opinion, knowledge still brings us, maybe not freedom, but understanding of the situation. We know what is happening, and we know what is best or right to choose, and why we choose it. Knowledge helps us to understand the point of making a choice.

*In the end, it seems clear that there was a general consensus among the participants of this discussion in rejecting the existence of Free Will. Yet, as an optimistic conclusion, some of us still believe we can give ourselves a certain degree of freedom by fighting with the anima part of ourselves, by applying self-regulation and ethical rules, and most of all, by the belief that science and knowledge will give us the key to freedom, or at least, the guiding arrow. This is one of the reasons why we introduce our Discussion Forum with the topic of Free Will. All our readers are welcome to comment or respond on this discussion.*

*We would like to thank all the participants, especially our guests from the Neuroscience Department, for this interesting and inspiring discussion.*

**Participants (in random order):** *Sylvia Barriga, Janina Marguc, Lannie Ligthart, Eveline van der Veer, Carmen Lee, Jeroen Senster, Gijs Nagtegaal, Nina Burger, Gerald van Grootest, Arno van Voorst, Kaska Kubacka, Linh Lan Phan, Victoria Visser, Liga Klavina, Niek van Ulzen, Wilco van Dijk, Lotte van Dillen.*