

# Free Will and Empathy: Two Revealing Topics in Neuroethics

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LIBET'S EXPERIMENTS AND MIRROR neurons are "tags" that immediately evoke two fundamental topics: free will and empathy. These are topics which have long been investigated by philosophers and today addressed by psychology and neuroscience, which can rely on experimental data. However, this interdisciplinarity is not what makes these topics so relevant, nor is it the reason why they were chosen as the two thematic sections that make up this issue of the *Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia*. The motivation is rather that, in neuroethics, understood as a discipline with its own thematic core, the impact of research on free will and empathy exceeds the scope of all these disciplines, involving society, politics and the public in general.<sup>1</sup>

New discoveries or theories, for instance, the theory of relativity, are of general interest, not because, they have immediate applications to everyday life, but because of their important cultural impacts. But new findings as to the existence or non-existence of human freedom or the alleged identification of the natural mechanisms underpinning empathy

seem to raise dilemmas and have immediate consequences both in terms of interpretation and in terms of changes in state policies, social choice and personal conduct.

Studies that suggest free will may be an illusion need to establish the scientific reliability and theoretical consistency of the concepts they aim to test, but this immediately opens the door to new interpretations, new experiments and possible political and social extrapolations. In particular, if we admit that conscious control has no role in our decision-making, we have to consider whether basic notions such as personal responsibility, which assume individual freedom, might cease to be meaningful (although not in all moral systems, as is known).<sup>2</sup>

The idea that freedom is an illusion can lead to major consequences. Scientific research has investigated the effects of not believing in the existence of freedom of choice as it is commonly understood. The results seem to indicate that those who do not believe in freedom are more inclined to ignore the rules of the group, to cheat and to be less altruistic.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the slogan "free-

ing ourselves from freedom” is used by some scholars and intellectuals to argue that the fall of the belief in free will can make us less authoritarian, less punitive against those who make mistakes, less oriented to competition and more sensitive to those whose fate is worse than ours, since science itself tells us that there is nothing that we “deserve”, for better or for worse.<sup>4</sup>

The law would also be affected by a shift of consensus with respect to human freedom. Today, the default position is to assume the free will of those who must comply with the law. It is a view held by virtually all contemporary criminal codes, admitting many exceptions due to mental illness, when certified by experts. If the notion of freedom were questioned, many key institutions of the law, and criminal law in particular, would find their foundations undermined. And the very idea of retributive punishment would probably lose all legitimacy, being replaced by consequentialist measures.

As is obvious, however, the issue does not only involve so-called experts, but all citizens, as decisions related to the concept of freedom involve the whole of society. And this is where experimental philosophy comes in: only recently haven taken the first steps, it has continues to acquire more and a wider range of followers. The field of free will has always been a privileged field of investigation for experimental philosophers, who start from the assumption that the insights of scholars are not the only ones to be tested and made known, but also those of non-experts, i.e. the majority of the population.

Although lacking a unique conclusion, the studies conducted so far seem to have (at least partially) refuted the idea that people’s basic insights are libertarian. Even when confronted with explicitly deterministic scenarios, most participants in the experiments believe that human beings are still free in their choices, thus showing an implicitly compatibilist position.

All of this greatly complicates the framework of research, since scientific findings and

philosophical reflections influence and shape the public’s insights, which in turn are an element in the complex investigation on free will.<sup>5</sup> In this sense neuroethics is a candidate to hold the reins, overcoming disciplinary divisions that still make it difficult to share all the knowledge and skills required. This is one of the objectives of this issue of *Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia*, welcoming contributors with several different backgrounds and focuses.

This is the case, not only for free will but also for empathy, the topic of many other papers presented in this volume. Until a few years ago, empathy was mainly an object of philosophical and psychological research; then the discovery of mirror neurons, considered by many (though certainly not all) to be a key mechanisms in empathy, brought research in cognitive neuroscience to the fore.<sup>6</sup>

Having identified the circumscribed brain areas that are activated both when we perform an action and when we observe someone performing that action seems to have marked a turning point in the debate on the genesis of understanding and identification with the experiences of others, one of the keys to social life. That empathy can be something embodied and primary, almost an automatism that we are all equipped with (unless one has neurological deficits), has challenged many assumptions about the role of education and culture.

It is said, therefore, that social superstructure could be what suppresses the spontaneous nature of empathic sharing in the joys and sorrows of others, and that mirror neurons may underlie many human phenomena hitherto hardly explained.<sup>7</sup> However, in some influential cultural reconstructions of seemingly little scientific rigour, empathy has come to be seen as the central virtue favoring personal and collective flowering. A corollary of this assumption is that human beings are considered to be good by nature, while institutions over time have made them bad. Allegedly, the only people committing violent or evil deeds are those with empathy-related

brain deficits, in the mirror neuron system of specific brain regions.

This has ended up generating a reaction that seeks to reduce the role of empathy and its brain mechanisms. In particular, it is emphasized that empathy, as an instinctive and atavistic reaction resulting from evolution, drives one to look after one's own small circle, with which one has direct interactions, rather than larger circles, which do not stimulate immediate reactions of emotional involvement. Human flourishing then, from simple reliance on the immediate emotional components of mirror neurons, goes on to involve a greater use of detached and rational evaluation, capable of greater universalism.<sup>8</sup>

As seen from these brief references to the fruitful and ongoing research on free will and empathy, neuroethics aims to act as a bridge between philosophy, psychology and neuroscience (with consequences in law, sociology and political science), to bind together experimentation, reflection and the relapses in general culture with respect to findings and their interpretations.

This is an important task, increasingly necessary for a society in which the brain sciences are becoming ever more important, colonizing psychology and philosophy. And this is the task that we hope to contribute to through the papers presented here and the paths that they implicitly indicate for the future.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> J. CLAUSEN, N. LEVY (eds.), *Handbook of Neuroethics*, Springer, Dordrecht 2015.

<sup>2</sup> E. NAHMIAS, *Is Free Will an Illusion? Confronting Challenges from Modern Mind Sciences*, in: W. SINNOTT-ARMSTRONG (ed.), *Moral Psychology*, vol. IV, *Free Will and Moral Responsibility*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014, pp. 1-26.

<sup>3</sup> K.D. VOHS, J.W. SCHOOLER, *The Value of Believing in Free Will: Encouraging a Belief in Determinism Increases Cheating*, in: «Psychological Science», vol. XIX, n. 1, 2008, pp. 49-54.

<sup>4</sup> G.D. CARUSO (ed.), *Exploring the Illusion of Free Will and Moral Responsibility*, Lexington Books, Lanham (MD) 2013.

<sup>5</sup> E. NAHMIAS, J. SHEPARD, S. REUTER, *It's OK if "my brain made me do it": People's Intuitions about Free Will and Neuroscientific Prediction*, in: «Cognition», vol. CXXXIII, n. 2, 2014, pp. 502-516.

<sup>6</sup> G. HICKOK, *The Myth of Mirror Neurons: The Real Neuroscience of Communication and Cognition*, WW Norton & Company, New York 2014; C. KEYSERS, *The Straw Man in the Brain*, in: «Science», vol. CCCXLVII, n. 6219, 2015, p. 240.

<sup>7</sup> M. IACOBONI, *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others*, Macmillan, New York 2009.

<sup>8</sup> J. PRINZ, *Against Empathy*, in: «The Southern Journal of Philosophy», vol. XLIX, n. 1, 2011, pp. 214-233; J. DECETY, K.J. YODER, *Empathy and Motivation for Justice: Cognitive Empathy and Concern, but not Emotional Empathy, Predict Sensitivity to Injustice for Others*, in: «Social Neuroscience», 2015, in press.