

Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics

The Illusion of Freedom: Agent-Causation and Self-Deception

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Biography

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Publication Details

Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics (ISSN: 2166-5087). March, 2015. Volume 3, Issue 1.

Citation

Quick, Jacob. 2015. "The Illusion of Freedom: Agent-Causation and Self-Deception." *Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics* 3 (1): 297–308.

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Abstract

My purpose in this paper is to argue in favor of the external observer and show that Campbell is not justified in merely relying on the testimony of the acting agent. First, I will present and explain the main tenets of Campbell's libertarian agent-causation. Second, I will analyze Campbell's defense of agent-causation. Third, I will present data gathered from psychological studies suggesting that acting agents are mostly unaware of the factors which comprise their actions. Fourth, I will present recent work done on the psychology of self-deception and how this research discredits the testimony of the acting agent. Finally, I will summarize my argument and discuss the implications of my argument for Campbell's motivation for agent-causation.

Keywords

Agent-causation, self-deception, introspection, epistemic privilege, psychology, Campbell, acting agent, external observer

In C.A. Campbell's *In Defence of Free Will*, Campbell defends an agent-causal theory of free will on the basis that a subject experiences himself as the uncaused cause of morally significant actions. However, the 'external observer' interprets another agent's actions as determined by causal antecedents apart from the acting agent. Thus, when S performs a morally significant action P, S interprets S as the *sole* cause of P. However, when an external observer T examines P, T interprets P as determined, at least in part, by causal antecedents apart from S. I will refer to S as the 'acting agent' and to T as the 'external observer.' Campbell then argues that the interpretation of the acting agent should take priority over the interpretation of the external observer in the free will debate. He places the burden of proof on the opposing side and bemoans the lack of literature that determinists have provided in favor of the external observer (Campbell 1967, 50).

Campbell's argument still plays a role in current discussions of free will, specifically concerning agent-causal theories. Campbell's thesis brings up some important questions: should priority be given to the interpretation of the acting agent or that of the external observer in the free will debate? When the results of external observation seem to conflict with our intuitions and beliefs concerning our own free actions, should we give priority to our intuitions or to the results of our observations? Recent psychological experiments

which show that agents are highly prone to self-deception and faulty self-assessment comes to bear upon analyzing these questions.

My purpose in this paper is to argue in favor of the external observer and show that Campbell is not justified in merely relying on the testimony of the acting agent. First, I will present and explain the main tenets of Campbell's libertarian agent-causation. Second, I will analyze Campbell's defense of agent-causation. Third, I will present data gathered from psychological studies suggesting that acting agents are mostly unaware of the factors which comprise their actions. Fourth, I will present recent work done on the psychology of self-deception and how this research discredits the testimony of the acting agent. Finally, I will summarize my argument and discuss the implications of my argument for Campbell's motivation for agent-causation.¹

I. Agent-Causation

Now I will present and explain the main tenets of Campbell's libertarian Agent-Causal view (AC). AC is an indeterministic view. Thus, AC maintains that agents have free will and that the free will that agents possess is incompatible with determinism. According to AC, when an agent performs a free action in a specific situation, that agent could have performed a different action in that exact situation, at the same time, and given the same past. In AC, the agent's free action is not caused by anything other than the agent. Neither reasons, nor desires, nor a state of affairs can produce the free action of an agent. The agent cannot be an effect of a prior cause. As a result, the agent must *solely* bring about a particular, free action (Campbell 1967, 43).²

II. Motivations for AC

Campbell admits that the metaphysics of AC can be complicated and confusing. Campbell also explains that he is not motivated to hold to AC on the basis of any conceptual clarity. Rather, Campbell proposes that AC is attractive because it coheres with the perspective of the acting agent (AA). As I have noted earlier Campbell maintains

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1. It is important to note that my intention is not to completely discredit the testimony of the acting agent. Rather, I want to show that the acting agent does not have the kind of epistemic privilege required in order for Campbell's defense of agent-causation to be successful.
 2. It should be noted that not all proponents of agent-causation maintain all of the tenets just listed. In fact, Randolph Clarke presents a different, less radical account of agent-causation (Clarke 1993, 191-203). However, since my argument specifically focuses on Campbell's defense, I will confine my discussion of AC to Campbell's account.

that when S performs a morally significant action P, S interprets S as the *sole* cause of P. However, when an external observer T examines P, T interprets P as determined, at least in part, by causal antecedents apart from S. In Campbell's account S is the acting agent (AA) and T is the external observer (EO). Campbell asks why humans believe that they are uncaused causes of their moral actions, and provides what he believes to be the best answer: "They do so, at bottom, because they feel certain of the existence of such activity from their immediate practical experience of themselves" (1967, 41). Campbell seeks to explain that it is in the situation of moral temptation that we experience our actions as originating solely within the self apart from desire, heredity, etc.

Campbell holds that the unintelligibility objection to AC only succeeds if one takes the position of EO. However, Campbell argues, the proper standpoint to take concerning free acts is that of AA. Campbell argues that it is an error for one to examine and discern the nature of free moral actions from the perspective of EO:

It is perfectly true that the standpoint of the external observer, which we are obliged to adopt in dealing with physical processes, does not furnish us with even a glimmering of a notion of what can be meant by an entity which acts causally and yet not through any of the determinate features of its character. So far as we confine ourselves to external observation, I agree that this notion must seem to us pure nonsense. But then we are not obliged to confine ourselves to external observation in dealing with the human agent. Here, though here alone, we have the inestimable advantage of being able to apprehend operations from the inside, from the standpoint of living experience. But if we do adopt this internal standpoint – surely a proper standpoint, and one which we should be only too glad to adopt if we could in the case of other entities – the situation is entirely changed. We find that we not merely can, but constantly do, attach meaning to a causation which is the self's causation but is not yet exercised by the self's character. (Campbell 1967, 48)

Thus, Campbell concedes that, from the standpoint of EO, AC is a nonsensical notion. However, AC accurately describes how things appear from the standpoint of AA and, moreover, the interpretation of AA should be given more weight when discerning the nature of free, morally significant actions. Thus, Campbell posits that AA should have *epistemic privilege* over EO concerning the precise nature of free moral actions. My definition of epistemic privilege, for the purpose of this paper, is as follows:

Epistemic Privilege: S has epistemic privilege if and only if S's interpretation concerning a certain subject P is presumed to most accurately correspond to the actual nature of P.

Campbell posits that if it were the case that an agent's causing a certain action could happen without relation to the acting agent's character, then the *only* way in which we could be aware of such a thing is from the perspective of AA. Campbell asserts that the only legitimate way in which one could criticize his position is to present "a reasoned justification of his cavalier attitude towards the testimony of practical self-consciousness. That is the primary desideratum" (1967, 50). My aim in this paper is to provide the very justification against the epistemic privilege of AA that Campbell demands.

While there is more literature critiquing the epistemic privilege of AA now than there was during Campbell's time, there are still proponents of agent-causation who find Campbell's motivation for AC compelling. For instance, Timothy O'Connor, perhaps the most prominent contemporary defender of an agent-causal account, contends:

...the agency theory is appealing because it captures the way we experience our own activity. It does not seem to me (at least ordinarily) that I am caused to act by the reasons which favor doings so; it seems to be the case, rather that I produce my decisions in view of those reasons, and could have, in an unconditional sense, decided differently... Such experiences could, of course, be wholly illusory, but do we not properly assume, in the absence of strong countervailing reasons, that things are pretty much the way they appear to us? (O'Connor 1995, 196).

Thus, Campbell's motivation for AC is still utilized in the free will discussion.

There are multiple ways to approach Campbell's argument. For instance, Mele argues that, contrary to the claims of Campbell and O'Connor, AA does not actually experience his own free actions as agent-caused (Mele 1995). However, my aim is not to contend with whether AA does or does not interpret her own experience as agent-caused. Rather, my contention is whether the perspective of AA can justifiably be utilized as a strong and persuasive argument on behalf of AC. Campbell challenges opponents of AC to provide data that disputes the idea that AA has epistemic privilege. In what follows, I will provide data gathered from multiple psychological experiments that discredits the epistemic privilege of AA.

III. Psychological Data

Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson performed psychological experiments that displayed the propensity of agents to be unaware of environmental influences upon their motivations and judgments.³ I will present two of their experiments and note the conclusions drawn from these experiments.

Nylon Stockings Experiment

In the Nylon Stockings experiments four identical nylon stockings were placed in a row. Participants were asked to judge the quality of the stockings and discern which stocking was superior to the others. The experiment was designed so that the subjects would examine the leftmost stocking first and going down the row, end the inspection by examining the rightmost stocking. The left-to-right positioning of the stockings had a major effect on the subjects' judgments. In fact, subjects were almost four times more likely to prefer the right-most stocking over the left-most stocking. Nisbett and Wilson note the response that participants gave when it was suggested that the positioning of the stockings played a role in determining their preferences:

When asked about the reason for their choices, no subject ever mentioned spontaneously the position of the article in the array. And, when asked directly about a possible effect of the position of the article, virtually all subjects denied it, usually with a worried glance at the interviewer suggesting that they felt either that they had misunderstood the question or were dealing with a madman. (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977, 243-244)

The Nylon Stockings experiment was repeated by using nightgowns instead of stockings. The left-to-right positioning played a major role in the subjects' choice of nightgown and confirmed the results of the Nylon Stockings Experiment (Nisbett and Wilson 1977, 243).

The European Professor

In another experiment, subjects were shown a video of a college teacher, who spoke English with a European accent, responding to a student's question. After watching the video, the subjects were asked to rate their appreciation of the teacher and their

3. I would like to thank Dr. Neil Otte for bringing the work of Nisbett and Wilson to my attention.

appreciation of the teacher's appearance, accent, and mannerisms. Half of the subjects saw the teacher answering the student's question in a warm, agreeable manner, while the other subjects saw the professor answer coldly. However, in both videos, the teacher's accent, mannerisms, and appearance remained the same. Those who saw the professor answer warmly rated the teacher's accent, mannerisms and appearance as attractive, while the majority of participants who saw him answer coldly found the teacher's qualities to be irritating. Nisbett and Wilson note that participants in both groups were asked whether their ratings of the teacher's qualities were affected by their appreciation of the teacher. Likewise, participants from both groups were asked whether their appreciation for the teacher's attributes affected their appreciation of the teacher. The participants in both warm and cold groups denied any causal connection between their impression of the teacher and their impression of his attributes. Also, all of the subjects in the warm group, who were asked, denied that their appreciation of the teacher's qualities affected their appreciation of the teacher overall. However, some of the participants in the cold version reported that their dislike of the teacher's qualities lowered their overall appreciation of him. Thus, the participants denied what was actually happening (their overall appreciation of the teacher affected their appreciation of his qualities) and some even inverted the causal relationship (Nisbett and Wilson 1977, 244-245).

The data that Nisbett and Wilson present suggests that we can commonly misunderstand the nature of our motivations, judgments, and interactions. In their experiments, AA is not aware of the effect that the external environment has on her acting states. While I only cited two experiments, Nisbett and Wilson utilize multiple experiments that suggest that we are not reliable informants concerning the nature of our own choices and actions. In fact, after examining and conducting their experiments, Nisbett and Wilson conclude: "The accuracy of subjective reports is so poor as to suggest that any introspective access that may exist is not sufficient to produce generally correct or reliable reports" (1977, 233). Thus, the experiments strongly suggest that the AA is not reliable and, therefore, does not have the Epistemic Privilege that Campbell's view requires.

IV. Self-Deception

Now, I will argue that recent studies on self-deception show that the perspective of AA should not be considered to have epistemic privilege concerning the nature of free action. There is a great debate, particularly in philosophical circles, over the nature and

existence of self-deception. My goal is not to recount the specifics of the debate.⁴ Rather, a great deal of psychological literature utilizes some notion of self-deception and appears to have found strong evidence in favor of it. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, I will utilize a notion of self-deception that accords with the phenomenon that continually arises in psychological experiments and studies. I find that Mele's notion of self-deception best articulates the phenomenon that psychologists find without falling into bewildering paradoxes.⁵

Mele's account of self-deception is strongly associated with desire. According to Mele, we often describe someone as self-deceived because they believe something that they want to believe, even though there is significant evidence to the contrary. Certain forms of ignoring evidence, biased interpretations, and etcetera, lead to self-deception. Mele offers a set of sufficient conditions that accurately describe S entering into self-deception:

- (i) The belief that p which S acquires is false.
- (ii) S's desiring that p leads S to manipulate (i.e., to treat inappropriately) a datum or data relevant, or at least seemingly relevant, to the truth value of p .
- (iii) This manipulation is a cause of S's acquiring the belief that p .
- (iv) If, in the causal chain between desire and manipulation or in that between manipulation and belief-acquisition, there are any accidental intermediaries (links), or intermediaries intentionally introduced by another agent, these intermediaries do not make S (significantly) less responsible for acquiring the belief that p than he would otherwise have been. (Mele 1983, 370)

I find that Mele's account of self-deception accurately describes the characteristics of self-deception discovered in psychological literature while remaining philosophically coherent.

4. Jeffrey Foss provides a helpful and thorough analysis of the various articulations of self-deception (1980, 237-243).

5. Such as the paradox of an agent intentionally deceiving himself into believing a proposition that he knows to be false. The paradoxes of the sort just mentioned can be found in the articulation of self-deception presented by Raphael Demos (1960, 588-595).

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Thus, the reader can assume that when I use the term 'self-deception', I am utilizing Mele's articulation.

Experiments in Self-Deception

Robert Trivers and William von Hippel, two psychologists who have done a great amount of research on self-deception, note multiple experiments in which agents deceive themselves *about themselves and their own actions*. Thus, in certain circumstances, agents have a high propensity for believing false information about the nature and details of their own actions. I will briefly present the results of multiple studies focused on self-deception.

Memory

Psychologists Trivers and von Hippel note that an agent's desires and preferences can cause the agent to misremember certain information about themselves and previous performances. In an experiment in which subjects participated in a study skills course, the participants remembered their original study skills, prior to the course, as lower than they actually were. Participants were prone to this deception because they strongly desired for their skills to improve as a result of the course. Likewise, a little while after the course was finished, the participants had to recount their performance upon completing the study skills course. The participants rated their final performance as higher than it actually was. Thus, the subjects' memories about themselves and their own actions were skewed because of their desire to improve. The subjects' desires led to their self-deception in falsely remembering their beginning performance as worse than it was and their final performance as greater than it actually was (Von Hippel and Trivers 2011, 10).

Rationalization

Research on self-deception and rationalization suggests that we often choose to do certain actions that we deem to be false or wrong when we are better able to rationalize our actions. Thus, our deceptive capacity extends to our decisions in situations of moral temptation. In one experiment, individuals that demonstrated a self-serving bias were placed in circumstances in which they had the ability to cheat. In one situation, the cheating was obviously intentional. In the other situation, the cheating was clearly intentional, but was easier to represent as unintentional due to particular factors in the setting. Those who were able to construe their cheating as unintentional committed the act, while those in the more obvious situation did not. Psychologists suggest that this

phenomenon occurs because, when other environmental factors are present, agents have the ability to deceive themselves into misremembering the intentionality of their action and attribute their action to the environmental factors. In the same vein, it has been shown that people who are told that free will is merely an illusion are more likely to cheat due to their ability to attribute their actions to external factors, obviating them of responsibility (Von Hippel and Trivers 2011, 10).

In another experiment, participants entered a room with two televisions and a disabled person sitting in front of one of the televisions. In some of the cases, both televisions were tuned in to the same program. In other cases, the televisions were tuned to different channels. The participants who walked in and saw that the televisions were on the same channel sat next to the disabled person, while the participants in the room with televisions on different channels sat away from the disabled person and in front of the opposite television. Researchers concluded that the participants who chose to sit away from the disabled person did so because they were able to deceive themselves about their action and claim that they did not sit away from the disabled in order to avoid the disabled, but because they wanted to watch the program that the other television was airing.

Self-deception plays a major role in our behavior in relation to people of another race. A study noted that white people were less likely to give aid to black people than to white people, but only when they could blame other environmental factors such as distance or risk. Thus, white people would help other white people whether or not there were obstacles present. However, white people only helped black people when there were no obstacles present. Since race was the variable, the study showed that the white participants have an implicit preference towards persons of their own race. The participants in the experiment utilized the presence of obstacles in order to justify their disregard for the needs of a black person and therefore deceive themselves into not attributing their action to racial preference. In the words of von Hippel and Trivers, “[The participants] are denying the socially undesirable motives that appear to underlie their behaviors by rationalizing their actions as the product of external forces.” (2011, 10).

Recent psychological studies and experiments suggest that self-deception is universally prevalent among agents. Self-deception has been connected with survival and success, which suggests that our ability to distort the truth to others and ourselves is an evolutionary design that best equips us for survival and flourishing (Von Hippel and Trivers 2011, 12-13). We are highly prone to deceive ourselves concerning our character, nature, and our morally significant actions. As a result, we are not justified in assuming that the perspective of AA most accurately corresponds to reality. On the contrary, the

perspective of AA is highly prone to distorting the nature of the agent's actions and deceiving the acting agent.

V. Conclusion

Campbell placed the burden of proof on EO to discredit the epistemic privilege of AA. I believe that recent psychological data demonstrates that AA does not have epistemic privilege with regard to the subject of free will. Psychological experiments indicate that our choices and actions can be heavily influenced by factors of which we are unaware. Studies in self-deception also demonstrate that we have a high propensity toward self-deception concerning our desires, our character, and the nature of our own actions. As a result, Campbell is not justified in granting epistemic privilege to AA.

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