

Philosophy of Attention Session 8:
The role of attention in action, responsibility and free will
(Jennings 2020, ch. 6; Evans 1975)

Action and responsibility

- Intentional action requires control, but not attention. Attention is just one kind of control. There is another kind of control, **strategic automaticity**. Actions can be intentional if controlled by strategic automaticity.
- Agents hold moral responsibility for *actions* controlled by strategic automaticity.
- Strategic automaticity shares an aspect of attention, namely, **focus**. Thus, focus and attention are dissociable.
- *Agents* are morally responsible only if they have the capacity for both types of control.
- Admitting strategic automaticity as a type of control solves the **problem of skilled behavior**, i.e.: are skilled behaviors intentional actions? They seem to involve, at the same time, both *more* and *less* agency than typical intentional actions.

Free will

- We have a concept of free will. Is this concept empty? Or does it apply to a “free will process” in the world?
- Evans’ answer: (The selective direction of) Attention is the process of free will

Structure of the paper:

- I. Characteristics of a process of free will
- II. Attention as free will (Franklin’s account)
- III. Relevant experimental findings
- IV. A revised account of attention as free will

I. An adequate referent for the concept “free will”:

- (A) Must be connected with overt action
- (B) Can be brought under control
- (C) Is controlled only by the subject whose process it is
- (D) Must be a process of self-control
- (E) Allows agents to be sometimes mistaken

“There are occasions in the lives of certain men when it is true to say of them that they are not mistaken when they in their primitive credulity believe that the act they are doing is wholly and completely within their own hands” (p. 191).

II. Franklin’s account

- Deliberation and choice, which are the basis of genuine free will, involve a frequent selective direction of attention

III. Experimental work: Dichotic listening, shadowing and the cocktail party effect

“We are certainly dealing with a process that actually exists if we are dealing with a process that can be received detailed investigation in a number of laboratories” (p. 193).

- **Dichotic listening:** Different messages are presented to right and left ear
- **Shadowing:** Participants must repeat the message from one of the ears
- The shadowed message is attended, the other one is unattended (selected vs. rejected). Evans links these to “projected” and “unprojected consciousness”, respectively.
- **Unprojected consciousness** is hazy and its “elements” are very basic. They do not include sophisticated information like meanings. However, for some signals of special kind, meanings are recovered.
- These special signals in unprojected consciousness can capture attention without the subject’s awareness or control. Evans calls them **captions**.
- **The cocktail party effect:** The sound of your own name captures attention even under noisy conditions.
- Captions reveal that even when subjects think that they have control over their attention switching all the time, they can be mistaken.
- Importantly, captions can direct attention to themselves, or to something else.
- In the latter case, captions create **storylines:** sequences of attention switches united by a theme.

IV. Attention satisfies the characteristics of a process of free will

- Agents can be mistaken about whether they are exercising free will. They may think that they are in control of their attention switches, when these are in fact controlled by a caption. This covers (E).
- Attention is a process that, although automatic and built-in, can be brought under control by the subject. This covers (B), (C) and (D).

“A person correctly thinks that they are performing an act of free will when this act follows from (an act of) voluntary control over an attention mechanism”

- By learning about our attention mechanisms, and by learning that we can exercise control over them, we can *learn* to exercise free will.
- Finally, attention is connected with action: selected and rejected thoughts are connected with action possibilities. The consequences of some storylines are actions (e.g., “Let’s play tennis”, p. 204). This covers (A).

Some questions:

Q1: Do we have a clear concept of free will? What is it?

Q2: Intuitively, what kind of things or factors do we consider as threats to our free will?

Q3: Do we intuitively think that we are in control of the storylines of our thinking? (see p. 198)

Q4: Can we fully eliminate the possibility that an attention switch was caused by a caption? (see p.199)