

**Opinion***Copyright © All rights are reserved by Paul A Wagner*

The Science and Metaphysics of Addiction and Recovery

Paul A Wagner**Department of Philosophy, University of Houston – Clear Lake, USA.*

***Corresponding author:** Paul A Wagner, Department of Philosophy, College of Human Sciences and Humanities, University of Houston – Clear Lake, USA.

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Opinion

Neuroscientist Benjamin Libet set much of the research agenda for researchers of consciousness following his groundbreaking experiment that seem to show that the brain decided on a course of action before the epiphenomenon of consciousness reported the action. For example, walking in a field upon hearing a rustle in the grass a person may instinctively jump aside. Later offering a reason for the behavior the person may say, I thought there was a snake in the grass. The brain received data, made a decision and set the body into motion before and apart from any willful reflection. Libet's experiments and those who followed his line of thinking [1,2] became increasingly convinced that person engagement with the external world is always governed by physical laws of neurophysiology. In the case of addiction or recovery all is determined by the brain interacting unconsciously with the surrounds.

Obviously, few infants are born with addictions save those born of an actively addicted mother at the time of birth. For the most part, persons become addicts. They become addicts not as a matter of choice but rather as a consequence of their genetically inherited physiology interacting with their immediate social, cultural and physical surrounds. Similarly, along this line of thinking, recovery too is far from any act of will. Rather recovery is a lawful function of the person's physiology interacting with their accumulated and immediate surrounds. Advocates may point out that many veterans returned from Vietnam with addictions but adapted to a non-addicted life by nothing more than immersion in an environment that offered little stimulus for continued addiction. Determinism

and the elimination of self-conscious management of behavior sums this tidy story. And, there is an abundance of evidence to make the story increasingly compelling as new research is completed. But, the last chapter of the story is yet to be written.

Nobel Laureate and neurophysiologist Sir John Eccles doesn't buy this account. I was fortunate to have Eccles as a personal friend for a number of years. In a paper that he presented to the British Royal Academy of Science he used Libet's own data to argue that there is a gap in timing that Libet cannot account for. Eccles argued that no causal equations for the aggregation and interpretation of data can account for this gap. Eccles claimed that at axon terminals of neurons, synaptic boutons responded in ways not fully accounted for by Libet's work nor of those that followed. In a personal letter to me, Eccles sent me a reprint of the article and explained in the letter he thinks the soul interacts with the synaptic boutons distributed throughout a person's body [3]. Libet was a staunch Catholic and he meant by soul just what is meant in religious history namely a determiner of human behavior.

If Eccles is right then a slide into alcoholism or other addictions is in part consequential of how one chose to engage the world at pivotal times in one's life. Eccles did not deny the role of genetic pre-dispositions or cultural influence. His point was to defend the idea that there is an essential essence of persons, a free will if you like, that is a determinate among other factors of human action. So, recovery like addiction is a function in part at least, of choices people decide upon.

The evidence for Libet's paradigm of brain monopoly determining all continues to accumulate [4]. But, defenders of free will still offer plausible alternatives to contemporary neurology's commitment to the thesis that all is determined probabilistically or otherwise. Alfred Mele is one of those defenders. Mele refers to evidence that Eccles gap still exists and has gone wanting for a deterministic explanation in at least one case. That one case is when something unexplained in the gap allows an override of an evident brain decision to act. In such cases all is not instinctual but something seems to allow for an override of the brain's decision mechanism. This Mele calls free will. It is not a proactive decision-mechanism, but it is a determinant in much behavior [5]. One is reminded of Immanuel Kant's discussion of autonomy as a capacity human have to override an apparent bad decision. In the case of addiction, humans make bad decisions in response to environmental cues and genetic predisposition. Repeated bad decisions in context lead to addiction. Similarly, in recovery persons choose not just to re-orient their bad decision-making but rather to reorient the architecture of their daily social, cultural and physical environment. "Just say no" is directed towards environment-creating conditions and not just to the act of ingesting alcohol or drugs.

Alcoholics Anonymous and clinical practices that treat addiction typically address addiction issues as if mind and environment are together determining factors. Is this therapeutic practice confirmations of Libet's emphasis that all is management of physical environs or are these protocols evidence of the presence of free will?

Certainly, recovered addicts believe free will played a role in leading them away from the abyss. But what they believe and what is actually going on in recovery or addiction may be different from what the existence or non-existence of consciousness indicates about things. This problem may seem intractable because it is

as metaphysical as it is empirical. Sir Peter Strawson notes that both physical and mental predicates are assigned to the personal pronoun "I" and this practice seems ubiquitous among all cultures. Frank Jackson has defended the autonomy of qualia. Qualia is the felt reality of individualized and personal experience. Yet Jackson himself is known to turn around and argue against his own position. Jackson is brilliant and well-respected and so his waffling has not led to criticism of his indecisiveness but to admiration and consideration of the arguments both ways [6].

For purposes of counseling the metaphysical problem of free will and consciousness probably do not need to be solved. Whatever works to rescue the endangered addict should be utilized and theory left aside as mere distraction. Still, it all makes you wonder does it not?

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Conflict of Interest

Author declare no conflict of interest.

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