

Do We Have a Default Belief in Free Will?

What is a philosophical belief? An explicit answer to this question is surprisingly difficult to find. There is a large philosophical literature on the nature of philosophy (e.g., Williamson 2007) and on the nature of belief (e.g., Nottelmann 2013). There is a large psychological literature on the causes and consequences of philosophical beliefs (e.g., Rigoni et al. 2017), and a growing anthropological literature on their cultural variability (e.g., Hannikainen et al. 2019). Finally, there is an emerging legal literature on those philosophical beliefs that are protected by the law (e.g., McKeown & Dunn 2021). A considerable amount of academic writing exists, therefore, where one might expect to find an answer to this question and where it would be important to have one. But no such answer seems to be available. To fill in this gap I take up the question in this paper. I reconstruct two answers that are commonly assumed in the literature (the Default View and the Technical View), I argue they are both problematic, and I suggest an alternative (the Transformative View). The view that I propose has some implications for how we investigate philosophical beliefs, which I discuss at the end.

To make the discussion manageable I focus on the particular example of belief in free will. This is a paradigmatic philosophical belief that has attracted more attention from researchers than almost any other. Philosophers, such as Spinoza (1677), have been interested in explaining this belief for centuries. However, it has become a lot more prominent in the last few of decades, because of the increasing number of empirical studies relevant both to the question whether we have free will (e.g., Libet et al. 1983) and whether we believe in it (e.g., Nichols 2004) and what role it plays in our psychology (e.g., Vohs & Schooler 2008). There is a worry that recent claims by scientists that science proves that there is no free will can knock out this default belief which is foundational for the functioning of society (e.g., Smilansky 2001).

In this paper, I question an assumption upon which this reasoning relies, namely: that there is a default belief in free will that these claims by neuroscientists and others can challenge. I see four main problems for the Default View about belief in free will. First, there are essentially no effects for the default philosophical belief in free will to explain. Second, for the effects that are there, there are other beliefs that explain them better. Third, the content of those beliefs, that empirical research has latched onto, is much thinner than that of the corresponding beliefs of philosophers. Finally, the content of those thinner beliefs varies so much across individuals and groups that it is problematic to speak of a single lay belief corresponding to the philosophers' belief. If that is the case, then there is no default belief in free will that scientists would challenge.