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Agents, their actions, and free will

lecture 11 and 12

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Aristotelean indeterminism

[...] we see that what will be has an origin both in deliberation and in action, and that, in general, in things that are not always actual there is the possibility of being and not being; here both possibilities are open, both being and not being, and consequently, both coming to be and not coming to be. Many things are obviously like this. For example, it is possible for this cloak to be cut up, and yet it will not be cut up but will wear out first. But equally, its not being cut up is also possible, for it would not be the case that it wore out first unless its not being cut up were possible. [...]. Clearly, therefore, not everything is or happens of necessity: some things happen as chance has it.

Comments:

Human agents are capable of bringing about the future in the sense: *they could do this rather than that*, and in this sense, are seeds of indeterminism (can cut up the coat and can abstain from that).

Today we need to generalize to some other objects (this sample can decay but it can stay non-decayed).

Possibilities (and some other modal baggage) are grounded in objects, they are possibilities *of* objects.

The world is indeterministic means that at least one object has alternative possible futures

Medieval debate: libertarians vs. necessitarians

Context: God's omniscience brings in necessity to the course of events. God knows what the future will be like, and thus knows, e.g., that event X will occur. It is thus impossible that X will not occur. Hence, it is necessary that X will occur.

This necessitarian position is in conflict with libertarians' position, which says that not everything is necessary.

The parties share a premise: our free actions (or our being free, or having free will) requires indeterminism (or is incompatible with global necessitarianism).

This shared premise (that free will requires indeterminism) is questioned by Hobbes and a tradition he initiates (Hume, Comte, Schlick, Carnap, and quite a few philosophers today).

Free will is compatible with determinism, and even more, free will requires determinism.

Hobbes:

Liberty is the absence of all the impediments to action that **are not contained in the nature and intrinsic quality** of the agent. As for example, the water is said to descend freely, or to have liberty to descend by the channel of the river, because there is no impediment that way, but not across, because the banks are impediments. And though the water cannot ascend, yet men never say it wants the liberty to ascend, [...] because the impediment is in the nature of the water, and intrinsic. So also we say, he that is tied, wants the liberty to go, because the impediment is not in him, but in his bands; whereas we say not so of him that is sick or lame, because the impediment is in himself.

A FREE MAN is he, that in those things, which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to. But **when the words free and liberty are applied to anything but bodies, they are abused [...]**

When 'tis said (for example) The way is free, no liberty of the way is signified, but of those that walk in it without stop. And when we say a gift is free, there is not meant any liberty of the gift, but of the giver, Lastly, from the use of the word free will, no liberty can be inferred of the will, desire, or inclination, but the liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to do.

By this language analysis Hobbes and his tradition argue against natural inclinations to link freedom to indeterminism.

To succeed, they need to go farther and show that indeterminism hampers free actions.

Lover of Bach's music (Carnap 1971).

He faces a choice: to take an evening stroll or attend a concert of Bach's sonatas.

Carnap predicts (by knowing his friend) that surely he'll go for the concert. (Carnap takes prediction as the evidence of determinism.)

Was the music lover compelled to go to the concert?

“Nothing of this kind, no one exerted the slightest pressure. I was never freer, in fact, than when given a choice of this sort”.

Carnap's "positive side of the question"

Unless there is some causal regularity, it is not possible to make a free choice at all. A choice involves a deliberate preference for one course of action over another. How could a choice possibly be made if the consequences of alternative courses of actions could not be foreseen?

Another intuition supporting Carnap:

If my bodily process were triggered by some chancy event (coin toss, quantum coin toss), I would not consider it *my* action. Why? Because I don't like to be responsible for it?

For a vivid and entertaining argument, Carnap-style, see Schlick's "When the man is responsible".

Luck Principle and Luck Argument (after Kane 1999)

(LP) If an action is undetermined at a time t , then its happening rather than not happening at t would be a matter of chance or luck, and so it could not be a free and responsible action.

Consider a business woman, hurrying for an important meeting, and seeing an elderly lady being mugged. She faces a choice: to help the lady or to be on time at the meeting.

Assume her choice is undetermined; to simplify, it's up to one neuron's chancy firing what she will do.

And, it fired! So she helped... But is she praiseworthy?

What's a link between indeterminism and being undetermined?

Or, can we re-run a similar argument using Lewis-style notion of indeterminism (in terms of divergent possible worlds)?

(a) In the actual world, person P (for example, the business-woman) does A at t.

On the assumption that the act is undetermined at t, we may imagine that:

(b) In a nearby-possible world which is the same as the actual world up to t, P* (P's counterpart with the same past) does otherwise (does B) at t.

(c) But then (since their pasts are the same), there is nothing about the agents' powers, capacities, states of mind, characters, dispositions, motives, and so on prior to t which explains the difference in choices in the two possible worlds.

(d) It is therefore a matter of luck or chance that P does A and P* does B at t.

(e) P is therefore not responsible (praiseworthy or blameworthy, as the case may be) for A at t (and presumably P* is also not responsible for B).

The debate continues

For some readings, see **THE DETERMINISM AND FREEDOM
PHILOSOPHY WEBSITE**,

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/dfwIntroIndex.htm>

Context

Before Hobbes (and the luck arguments he initiated):

it was commonly believed that free actions (or our being free, or having free will) requires indeterminism.

Both Hobbes's tradition and its opponents accept this claim:

A is an agent's action provided that the agent is accountable for / takes responsibility for A.

Both parties accept this responsibility-action link for a different reason

Hobbes's tradition: the hero of the luck argument has not performed an action because she cannot take responsibility for it. (The aim is to dismiss indeterministic underpinnings of free actions).

Anti-Hobbes camp: how can I be morally responsible for A, if I might not have been able to do otherwise? Moral responsibility for A requires alternative possibilities wrt A. So the camp attempts to restore the old doctrine "free will requires indeterminism" by attending to the responsibility-action link.

The link seems to cut both ways. Stalemate.

The link “responsibility requires indeterminism” undercut by H.Franfurt’s arguments.

Context: my tram suddenly braked. As a result, I pushed an elderly lady. So she is complaining now. Should I (sincerely) apologize? The crucial point seems to be: could I have done otherwise, ie. not push the lady?

For instance, I did not hold the railings. If I had hold...

Frankfurt's Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP)

A person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.

Logic point: the thought is that alternative possibilities are the necessary condition for moral responsibility.

To put this in a logic notation,

If a person is morally responsible for what he has done, *then* he could have done otherwise.

le, it is impossible that a person is morally responsible, but alternative possibilities have not obtained.

A counter-example to APA: a person intuitively taken to be morally responsible for A, though s/he has had no alternative option.

A story to undermine PAP:

Sam and Bill take a disliking to a mayor. Sam confesses he's going to kill the mayor. Bill is a tricky fellow: if he sees signs of hesitation in Sam, he will kill the mayor himself. But Sam does not hesitate, does not show the mentioned signs, and so Bill does not intervene.

Intuitively, Sam is responsible for the death of the mayor, although his death is inevitable.

The structure of Frankfurt's stories:

A person faces a choice, and knows she faces a choice between options A, B, C, ..., Z. (This means: exactly one of these options will materialize, and she knows it.)

Unbeknownst to our person, there is factor Fa that has a disposition to bring about, say, B. That is, if our person did not choose B, factor Fa would intervene, and guarantee that B obtains.

As a result, it is impossible that anything other than B occurs.

Objections to the argument (van Inwagen). Draw a distinction between responsibility for an *action* (or omission of an action) and responsibility for *consequences* (events, state of affairs) of an action.

Concerning omission, here is the refined PAP:

If a person is morally responsible for failing to perform a given action, then he could have performed that act.

Van Inwagen: attempts to falsify this refined principle fail. For instance, I just saw a lady being mugged, but being slothful I failed to call and inform the police. Unbeknownst to me, the phone line was down. Am I responsible for failing to call and inform the police. Intuitions (at least van Inwagen's): I'm not.

Concerning responsibility for consequences of actions (understood as particular concrete events), van Inwagen puts forward this:

If a person is morally responsible for a certain event (particular), then he could have prevented this event.

Can we tell a story - counter-example to the above principle?

Recall the Sam and Bill story in which Sam kills the mayor. Could Sam have prevented *this event*? Well, what are criteria of identification for particular events? Natural move: same causal history <---> same particular event. If so, simply by not pushing his pistol's trigger, Sam could have prevented *this event* of killing the mayor. Some other particular event of killing the mayor would issue. But that would be a *different* particular event.

Van Inwagen's version's of PAP phrased in terms of *preventing* rather than *having the ability to do otherwise*.

Two problems:

(I) Trivialization. With identifying particular events in terms of causal histories, it is extremely easy to prevent any event an agent is involved in.

Explain "involvement" by saying: I'm involved with a particular event if one of my voluntary actions is among partial causes of this event.

With this explanation, I easily prevent an event I'm involved with - by simply not performing the mentioned voluntary act.

APA is an implication. By using particular events, we make its consequent true in all interesting cases (cases where I'm involved in an event). So, in all interesting cases, PAP is true and cannot be false.

But APA was supposed to be a substantial claim, not a tautology that is true by the meaning of words only.

Van Inwagen's version's of PAP phrased in terms of *preventing* rather than *having the ability to do otherwise*.

(2) *Preventing* does not discriminate between cases with and without responsibility.

In Missile 1 and Missile 3 the heroines can prevent a particular event of bombing of Washington DC; but first is blameworthy whereas the second is not.

That's a mild objection; after all, APA gives a necessary condition for moral responsibility rather than sufficient condition. So it should not be expected to discriminate between cases with and without moral responsibility.

Yet with this answer the perception of triviality is even stronger.

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The debate continues and is hot ...

The new issue: control. Maybe the reason why the “action” of the heroine of the luck argument is not considered her free action, is not that she does not take responsibility for it, but (more fundamentally) she did not have control over the relevant process.

Neurology of free-will - Libet's (1983) experiments and reactions to them

Question: what's the timing between the neuro
(=unconscious) state "ready to go" and the conscious state
"to go"?

Assumption: a state "ready to go" is so selected that it
necessitates "to go"

The lore of free action: we first consciously choose a, then
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A discovery of reversed time ordering cast a shadow on agentive causation: it is not my decision that causes an action (otherwise backward causation)

Perhaps it's neurostates that decide. But these are typically associated with determinism. Consequence: there are no seeds of freedom in us.

Experiment:

Command: raise you finger when you want.

Observation:

- report awareness time AT when you felt the willingness to raise your finger
- (EEG) when the readiness potential RP first occurred?
- calibrate: account for a lag between becoming conscious and reporting.

Finding: RP comes first, before AT. And after the calibration as well, ie., $t(AP) - t(RP) - \text{lag} = 350 \text{ ms}$

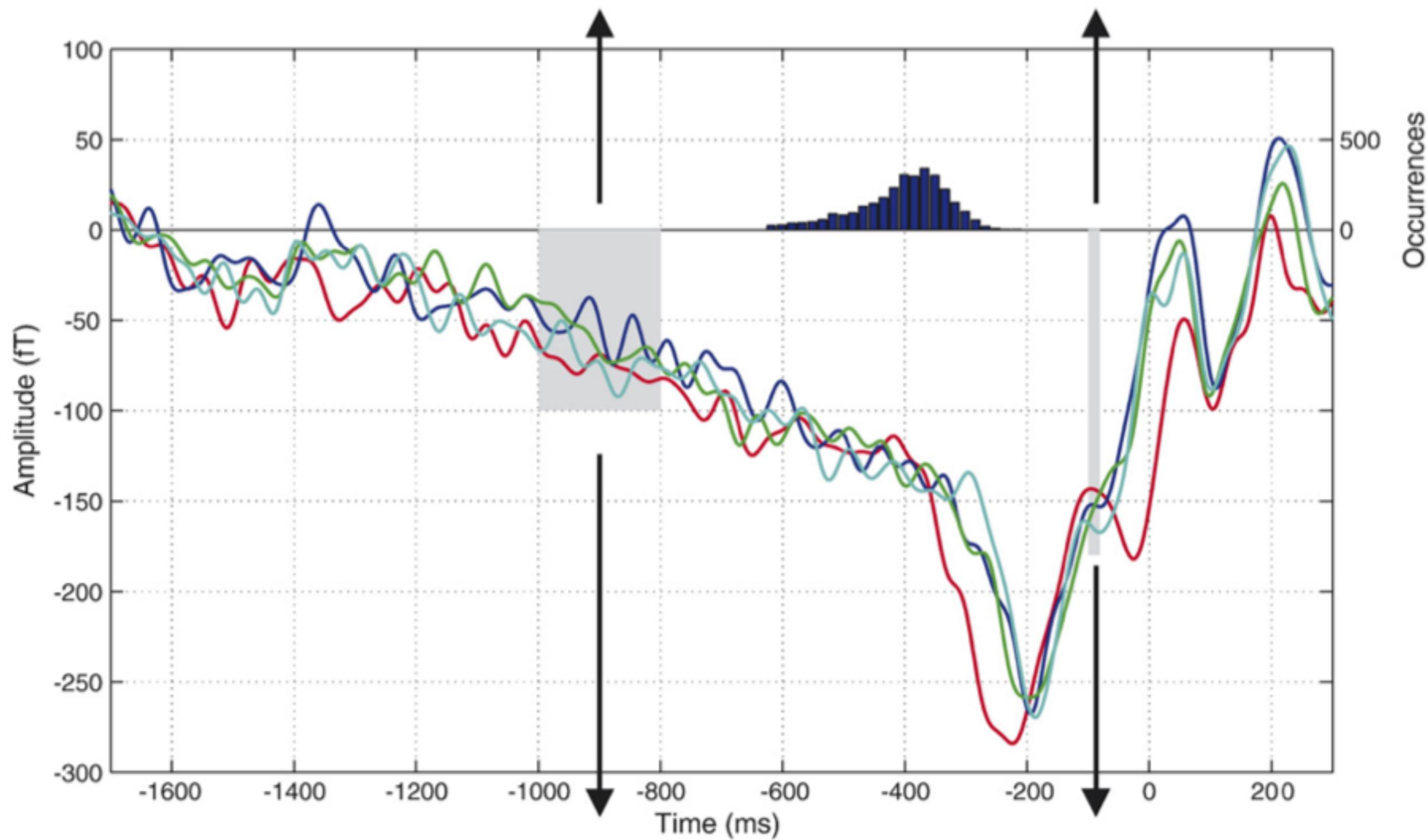
Big question: does RP necessitates raising of the finger?

Libet's caveat: vetoing model.

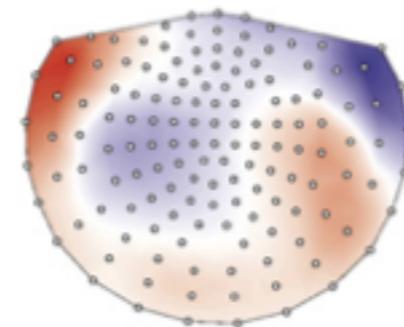
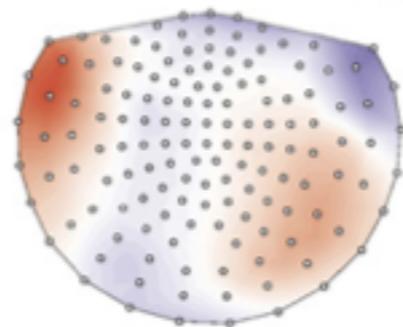
A reaction to Libet (Herman 2008)

Main point of criticism:

- necessitating
- symmetric EEG signal
- does the instruction leave enough freedom of choice?
- unreliability of AT estimations



Right-hand responses:



Our results demonstrate a readiness field which precedes a response to a visual stimulus. Our results show that neural activity which is present prior to motor responses emerges well before the presentation of a stimulus. At that time, the participants were not capable of knowing whether to press the left-hand or the right-hand button before a stimulus appeared. In addition, the activation preceding the stimulation did not differ significantly between the two response alternatives. Thus, the observed activity cannot be regarded as a specific preparation to press one of the buttons rather than the other one. These results shed some light on the impact of Libet's experiments on the freedom of will debate. According to Libet's own interpretation, his results show that 'the initiation of the free voluntary act appears to begin in the brain unconsciously, well before the person consciously knows he wants to act!' (Libet, 1999). In an earlier paper, Libet made an even stronger claim, saying that 'the brain decides to initiate or, at least, to prepare to initiate the act before there is any reportable subjective awareness that such a decision has taken place' (Libet, 1985). According to a weaker interpretation, Libet's results show that some kind of body movement is prepared by unconscious brain activity before the conscious decision is made. This preparation may

eventually result in different movements. Since the freedom of will debate concerns conscious decisions between different available alternatives, the impact of Libet's experiments on this debate depends on the truth of the strong interpretation. Thus, only if Libet's data show that the unconscious RP predetermines a specific movement, can it be argued that the conscious decision concerning this movement is only an illusion and freedom is put at risk. However, if the RP is compatible with different outcomes, then one might suppose that the selection between these outcomes is up to another process, maybe to the agent's conscious decision which, in turn, may of course be neurally realised. Our results provide evidence against the stronger hypothesis. Because the RP sets in before the stimulus is presented and participants react appropriately, the RP cannot determine which of the two alternatives available (right-hand vs. left-hand movement) is executed. Rather, the RP seems to reflect a general expectation or an unspecific motor preparation of both hands. Of course, Libet's participants performed only one specific movement, but this was due to the instruction. Provided that there is an instruction that gives room for two different alternatives, as was the case in our experiment, a decision in favour of one of these alternatives can be made even after the expectancy activity has set in. It would seem, then, that there are reasons to reject the stronger hypothesis and to doubt whether Libet's results can be interpreted as evidence against the freedom of will.