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Letters

Does free will exist?

The article on Benjamin Libet's work ("Who's the Boss?" SN: 4/26/86, p. 266), while giving us insights into the distinction between conscious and unconscious control of human actions, says nothing about the issue of free will. The classical dichotomy is free will versus predestination: whether we determine what we shall do *ad hoc* or whether there is a script that we are all (presumably unconsciously) following. A third possibility, that we are controlled in "real time" by another being, just removes the question of free will to that being (or to the being that controls it and so on).

I believe there is no experiment that can distinguish among the alternatives. Try to construct, for example, an unchallengeable exercise of free will. Whatever the subject does, including comments such as "I am doing this of my own free will," could have been predetermined. Even Libet's "readiness potential" could be predetermined. The only way to prove predestination is to find the script, and

This Week

- 372 Challenger Disaster: 'Rooted in History'
- 372 NASA's Graham to be science adviser
- 373 Altamira cave art: Low-vent district?
- 373 The light side of rock fractures
- 374 Polar-equatorial climate link reported
- 374 Professors minding their own business
- 375 Blood cleansing gets report card
- 375 Hormone conversion key to long life?

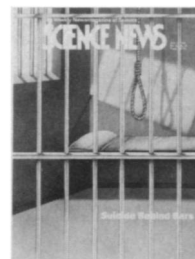
Research Notes

- 376 AAAS
- 377 Biomedicine
- 377 Mathematics

Articles

- 378 Roaches: The Battle Continues
- 380 Bruce Danto and the Crime of Jail Suicide

Cover: One reason prisoners are committing suicide in record numbers, according to behavioral researchers, is that many mentally disturbed people are being jailed for lack of mental health clinics and hospitals. One forensic psychiatrist says that many such suicides are preventable. (Illustration: Donna Ward)



Departments

- 371 Letters
- 379 Books

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then test and see if one can act differently. I do not think such a script is forthcoming.

Until an experiment can be invented, the issue is not in the realm of science but is philosophy or mysticism. Hence I must disagree with the article: Libet's work does not constitute a test or demonstration, even in part, of the concept of free will.

Jef Raskin
Menlo Park, Calif.

Libet responds: Our work does say something about free will. It says that free will is not excluded, even though voluntary acts are initiated unconsciously; if we had found that awareness (of the urge to act) followed the act, free will would have been in serious trouble. It also says that free will, if it exists, would operate to select among and control unconscious urges rather than to initiate volitional urges.

Raskin's chief concern, the existence of free will, was not directly addressed experimentally by our work, and I made no claim on that issue. However, I would take the occasion to note that Raskin's demand for an unchallengeable ex-

periment that would deal with this question in an absolute manner would tend to demolish much science even in issues that he would regard as legitimate concerns of science. Is there absolute and unchallengeable proof of evolution? Even though free will may not be absolutely falsifiable or nonfalsifiable experimentally, it is possible to envision types of evidence that could affect one's views about its existence or nonexistence.

Correction: The remineralized tooth crystals shown in "Rinsing Away Decay" (SN: 4/19/86, p. 251) grew to about 100 nanometers in diameter, not 100 microns as reported.

Correction: Ian G. Barbour ("A Critique of Critical Realism," SN: 4/29/86, p. 268) is a professor at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., not at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario.

Correction: In "Electrons With Drag" (SN: 5/10/86, p. 298), "cesium" should read "cerium." The chemical symbol Ce is correct.

JUNE 14, 1986

371