Social Explanations and the Free Will Problem

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There is strikingly little agreement across academic fields about the existence of free will, what experimental results show, and even what the term 'free will' means. In Lee and Harris's "A Social Perspective on Debates about Free Will" the authors argue that group identities and their attendant social rewards are part of the problem. As they portray it, "different philosophical stances create social groups and inherent conflict, hindering interdisciplinary intellectual exploration on the question of free will because people incorporate their support for a particular stance into their identity" (ms 1). Lee and Harris's exciting approach downplays the stated basis of academic disagreements, instead looking to social phenomena to explain why academic theorists adopt their positions. In particular, they argue that (1) philosophical convictions are structured by social group membership, and (2) the way such groups operate disfavors alternative philosophical commitments on free will.

On the face of it, serious scientific study of academic prestige and social dynamics ought to be amenable to broadly empirical study.[1] Moreover, Lee and Harris are surely right that humans are sensitive to social reward, that perceived social rewards affect the way groups operate, and that insights about these matters might help us understand the intellectual economy of the academy. Despite my enthusiasm for their general approach, my remarks here reflect disciplinary norms in philosophy. That is, I focus nearly entirely on points of disagreement. I argue that: (1) we cannot explain free will debates without more attention to the actual content of academic disputes; (2) there is little reason to think that academic groups are, as such, committed to philosophical stances on free will; (3) identities underdetermine philosophical commitments, anyway; and (4) academic groups have distinctive norms that don't support the particular social rewards account offered by Lee and Harris. In sum, we cannot tell a compelling story about the way social pressures operate on academics and disciplines without data specific to those populations and their particular norms, interests, and values.

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What is key for Lee and Harris is that groups are identity generating, and that members of groups seek social approval from others in light of that identity. As they put it "[b]eing good in one's discipline requires adhering to the philosophical position undergirding that particular discipline" (ms 3). I will presume that the paradigmatic case of group identity for their purposes is disciplinary—e.g., one's identity as a philosopher, as a lawyer, or as a scientist.[2] On this reading, disciplinary identities structure substantive philosophical commitments on the free will problem.

Lee and Harris go on to offer some examples of the way disciplines generate norms governing which beliefs their scholars should have about free will. They write that, "for instance, legal scholars should endorse a free will position, while most scientists are intrinsically deterministic" (ms 3). For philosophers, at least, there is something telling about this remark and other ways of framing the issue they seek to explain. Lee and Harris seem to be assuming that there are really only two philosophically significant views about free will: whether we have it or whether determinism is true.

I mention this not to invite metaphysical dispute but to cast doubt on whether we can explain academic debates without appeal to their content. Here's why I say that: One of the first things discussed in a nearly any introductory textbook on free will is that it is an open question whether determinism rules out free will.[3] There is a distinguished philosophical position, called *compatibilism*, held since at least the Stoics (and by luminaries such as John Locke and David Hume, along with a good many living philosophers), on which one can have free will even if determinism is true.[4] However, Lee and Harris's claim that lawyers should embrace "a free will position" and that scientists are "intrinsically deterministic" only makes sense if you presume *in*compatibilism, or compatibilism's traditional contrary.[5] That is, Lee and Harris evidently think that the array of substantive philosophical positions on free will are two. In this, they are at odds with the core of scholarly work on free will in the past century.

Why does any of this matter? They might well be correct to presume the falsity of compatibilism. However, if we simply assume incompatibilism and then approach disciplinary debates about free will, we are bound to radically misunderstand important strands of the very thing we seek to explain—i.e., substantive disagreements about free will across disciplines. Indeed, it is not clear how one could evaluate the success of the account in explaining group differences if one is not clear on what those differences are.

Given that Lee and Harris appeal to social identities structured by philosophical commitments, it is curious that they try to tell that story without paying more attention to the actual diversity of philosophical commitments in the literature.[6]

I now turn to a second, distinct concern about their account. Contrary to what Lee and Harris suggest, there is no reason for thinking that many, perhaps even any, disciplines are unified by specific views about free will.

Philosophy is perhaps the most notorious case: There is no convergence among philosophers in favor of any particular view about free will.[7] Moreover, the fields Lee and Harris mention suggest a widespread difficulty for their account. Recall their suggestion that "legal scholars should endorse a free will position" (3).

Here is noted legal scholar Stephen Morse on the same issue:

> none of the law's general criteria for responsibility or excuse refer to free will or its absence. Lack of action, lack of rationality, and compulsion all excuse, but none of these conditions has anything to do with free will. There may be problems conceptualizing and evaluating the lack of rational capacity or compulsion. These are real problems for law and for forensic psychiatry and psychology, but they are not free will problems. Lawyers and forensic practitioners often speak and write as if these are "free will" problems, as if lack of free will were a synonym for lack of action, irrationality, or compulsion. Nevertheless, free will is doing no work whatsoever independent of these genuine excusing conditions and it thus threatens to confuse the issues.[8]

Morse's point is that, sloppy language aside, the law requires no view about free will whatsoever. Lee and Harris could reply that it would be sufficient for their purposes if lawyers *thought* the law required a view about free will. However, I don't see how this would help. The force of Morse's point is that there is, in fact, no legal requirement in the law, and moreover, that when lawyers have talked about free will, it has been a shorthand for a diverse set of things. What Morse's remarks suggest is that fields can have diverse commitments about what constitutes free will and that there may be little uniformity in commitment to one or another conception of it. In the case of law, and *pace* Lee and Harris, there are (at best) contested commitments about free will and at worst no commitment at all sufficient to fund an ascription of the legal discipline's view about free will.

At this point it may be helpful to introduce a distinction between *beliefs*, *methodologies*, and *values* in an academic field. Roughly, beliefs are the convictions people have. Methodologies are the ways in which

people conduct their research or scholarship. Values are things like truth, originality, explanatory power, and those considerations in light of which we evaluate and accept research and theories.

My suspicion is that, across fields, we will find considerable variation in the degree to which a given field has convergence across these domains. Some fields might have a great deal of convergence in all three elements. Others will have comparatively little convergence. The case that Lee and Harris make seems to depend on *belief* convergence, as when they speak of one's "philosophical position align[ing] with the discipline" (ms 3). Closer consideration of law (and, philosophy, for that matter) suggests that in many fields we will find that there is widespread agreement about values, less agreement about methods, and comparatively little agreement about beliefs. In short, Lee and Harris' approach appears to rely on an unlikely, or at least unmotivated, view about belief convergence internal to academic groups.

Matters aren't obviously better when we consider the purported deterministic commitment of scientists, as invoked by Lee and Harris (recall: scientists are characterized as "intrinsically deterministic"). For the sake of argument, let us assume with Lee and Harris that we can usefully speak of scientists in general, and let's even assume the truth of incompatibilism. If so, it seems *especially* puzzling why we should think scientists are committed to the thesis of determinism. After all, it was science, in the form of standard interpretations of quantum mechanics, that gave us reason to doubt that old models of determinism were true.[9]

That said, there is surely something right about the idea that many scientists seem to work with deterministic presumptions. There is some reason to think that this is simply a failure to see through the consequences of going scientific theories, or more charitably, that it is a grossly simplifying assumption that makes modeling easier.[10] Notice that neither inferential failure nor ease of modeling would obviously license the kind of thing that Lee and Harris' position requires, i.e., that accepting nondeterministic causation entails a loss of scientific credibility or status. So, why think scientists are indeed committed to determinism?

Here's a third concern: Identity seems to grossly underdetermine abstract philosophical commitments. Consider Lee and Harris' claim that in the context of ongoing disagreement in interdisciplinary contexts, "group conflict resolution is highly unlikely" because "people may not be willing to give up their group identities—a source of social reward—for alternate rewards" (13). However, Lee and

Harris also acknowledge that social reward may not exhaust the sources of motivation or loci of control in individuals (ms 24). If that is right—if social reward is one motivation among many—it is not clear why we should think social reward is doing the heavy lifting in explaining the free will debate in particular.[11]

Again, it helps to look at academic work on the topic. Numerous academics have, in print, acknowledged a substantive change in their views about free will. Importantly, such changes have been diverse in their directions—sometimes towards free will skepticism, sometimes away, sometimes towards incompatibilism, sometimes away.[12] So here, too, the work of actual academics working on free will suggests that whatever force social identity has on commitments to free will, that force considerably underdetermines the stability and content of those convictions.[13]

There's another difficulty lurking here. Even granting that identities structure doxastic commitments, why think it is one's disciplinary identity that does that structuring? Why not membership in the academy more generally? Or membership in a subfield? Or even one's membership in powerful communities external to the academy (such as a religion or a political ideology)? Why should my free will commitments as a psychologist trump my free will commitments as a Catholic, or Marxist, atheist, or even a moralizing parent?

As I read the social psychology literature, the going view is that an individual's sense of self or identity is not cross-situationally stable, that it is not unitary, and that it is subject to a diverse array of constituting and influencing forces.[14] So, whatever the story turns out to be about specifically disciplinary identity, it is prima facie implausible to think it goes very far in explaining belief commitments—or, at any rate, any such story would need to be given on entirely different order of complexity than the story Lee and Harris provide.

My fourth and final concern about Lee and Harris's account is this: Their approach to understanding status and identity misses an important and distinctive feature of academe. Recall that Lee and Harris claim that "being good in one's discipline requires adhering to the philosophical position undergirding that particular discipline" (3). However, in many academic fields, status seems to track a rather different norm, something like this: A great academic is one who provides an original and distinctive position buttressed with powerful evidence or argument. If that's right, then there are incentives in the academy to hold distinctive views, views that cut against prevailing orthodoxy.

Philosophy is again illustrative. There is no shortage of influential views that are not widely accepted: Modal realism, eliminative materialism, and responsibility skepticism are only the tip of the iceberg. My identity as a philosopher is not obviously threatened by taking an unorthodox view. On the contrary: if I can do a reasonable job of defending heterodoxy, it is status-enhancing.[15]

Norms favoring such things as *giving compelling evidence* and *saying true things* are presumably not uncommon in many fields. If so, these disciplinary norms will inhibit any pressures towards convergence when evidence and argument provide opportunity.[16] On this characterization, academic groups are plausibly different than the nonacademic groups for which alethic and evidential norms might be different. Thus, if we take seriously their important proposal to appreciate the role of *social* forces in academic life, then it seems to me we should take seriously the role of *academic* forces in those social lives. We cannot appeal, as Lee and Harris do, exclusively to research about social identity that was performed on groups with plausibly different internal norms.

Lee and Harris anticipate something like this reply. They notes that academics might "simply weigh the arguments, choose the one they prefer, or that makes the most intrinsic sense, and stick with that position. Even with this possibility, reward is still relevant given there was a preference and a choice" (ms 5). I find this reply hard to square with their admission that they have not shown that social reward is the only motivation operative among academics. Moreover, it seems beside the point. The issue was never whether *rewards* were at stake in academic commitments but whether the rewards had the particular social structure they describe. Here, it seems we do better to suppose that at least sometimes, truth can be its own reward.

Notes

[1] It would be *more* surprising if academic prestige and social dynamics weren't at all amenable to empirical study. For some influential studies on various different aspects of the academy, see Randall Collins, *Sociology of Philosophies* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1998); Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988); Michele Lamont, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); Bruno. Latour, and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979); Pascale. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). For a defense of the idea that the persistence of the free will problem is not entirely a matter of argument, but partly a matter of accidents of personal history and methodology in philosophy, see Manuel Vargas, "Philosophy and the Folk: On Some Implications of Experimental Work for Philosophical Debates on Free Will," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 6, no. 1 & 2 (2006): 239-54; Manuel Vargas, *Building Better Beings: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, in press).

[2] It is not always clear which groups are the subject of their account. In some places, the idea seems to be that the relevant groups are to be construed in terms of philosophical predilections in ways that conceivably cross-cut departmental affiliations, as when they write "all groups in the free will and determinism debate—metaphysics, mind, and ethics—believe in their stance; beliefs that strengthen when interacting with in-group members" (ms 1-2). In other places, Lee and Harris seem to be thinking of the relevant groups as distinguished by academic field (as when they emphasize the costs of group identity for interdisciplinary exploration, or when they give as an example of a department as an academic social group).

It would be a big surprise to members of many philosophy departments that they are, in Lee and Harris' words "comprised of . . . people who study similar topics from similar perspectives" (ms 2). I'm not sure the topics or methods of the person who studies systematics in biology has much to do with the Heideggerian interested in Aristotle's notion of *pathos* or the neo-Thomist who writes about the moral wrongs of abortion from a natural law perspective.

[3] For example: Kevin Timpe, *Free Will: Sourcehood and Its Alternatives*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2013); Joseph Keim Campbell, *Free Will* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011); Meghan Griffith, *Free Will: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2012); T. J. Mawson, *Free Will: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2011); John Martin Fischer, et al., *Four Views on Free Will* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

[4] Anecdotally, scientists are often inclined to dismiss compatibilism, or at any rate, tend to give the appearance of not understanding it. Although the matter is complicated, experimental work on the convictions of laypersons suggests that philosophers and laypersons are fellow travelers in treating compatibilism as a viable position. See Eddy Nahmias, et al., "Is Incompatibilism Intuitive?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73, no. 1 (2006): 28-53; Eddy Nahmias, "Intuitions About Free Will, Determinism, and Bypassing," in *Oxford Handbook of Free Will, 2ed.*, ed. Robert Kane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Robert L. Woolfolk, et al., "Identification, Situational Constraint, and Social Cognition: Studies in the Attribution of Moral Responsibility," *Cognition* 100 (2006): 283-401. For related discussion, see Alfred Mele, "Free Will and Substance Dualism: The Real Scientific Threat to Free Will?," in *Moral Psychology, Volume 4: Free Will and Moral Responsibility*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, forthcoming).

[5] On a compatibilist account, a "free will position" does not speak for or against determinism, and a "deterministic" position does not speak for or against free will.

[6] There are other places where attention to the content of the debate might help. In considering the relationship between an individual's philosophical commitments and a discipline's commitments, they consider whether scholars adopt their philosophical positions of their own free will. Lee and Harris go on to say that "if this choice of philosophy is determined by their discipline, then this seems to suggest a restriction of choice" (ms 3-4). Even bracketing the possibility of compatibilism, we should be careful to avoid conflating *determination* (the settling of some matter; in this case, causation as such) with (causal) *determinism* (what used to get called *necessitation*). The same apparent conflation appears later, when, Lee and Harris draw the inference that the release of dopamine in the brain suggests "we don't have control over what is perceived as rewarding. Therefore determinism appears to be winning" (ms 23). I know of no credible account on which absence of con-

trol by itself entails determinism, or on which all neurological events have been shown to be deterministic. Similarly, they claim to have shown that "social rewards activate deterministic biological processes" (ms 24) but as far as I can make out, the results they point to don't offer any reason to think the involved processes are deterministic (as opposed to probabilistic).

[7] Here's a nice piece of evidence: Kevin Timpe has noted that the book *Four Views on Free Will* has the lamentable shortcoming of only discussing four views, and not the entire scope of active views in the free will debate. See Kevin Timpe, *Free Will: Sourcehood and Its Alternatives*.

[8] Stephen J. Morse, "The Non-Problem of Free Will in Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 25 (2007), p. 207.

[9] On pain of denying the reality of Geiger counters and/or standard interpretations of quantum mechanics, no scientists with passing familiarity with twentieth-century developments in physics should think determinism is an *obvious* feature of the world everywhere we look. Even if we limit our attention to psychology, there is nothing in the experimental data to support deterministic generalizations in any interesting way. It would be something of a miracle to regularly find interesting behavioral studies generating results for some target behavior at rates in the high nineties. For discussion of the difficulty of drawing substantive conclusions about various aspects of the free will problem from psychological research, see John Doris, and Dominic Murphy, "From My Lai to Abu Ghraib: The Moral Psychology of Atrocity," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31 (2007): 25-55; Dana Nelkin, "Freedom, Responsibility, and the Challenge of Situationism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2005): 181-206; Eddy Nahmias, "Autonomous Agency and Social Psychology," in *Cartographies of the Mind: Philosophy and Psychology in Intersection*, ed. Massimo Marraffa, et al. (Berlin: Springer, 2007). For discussion of this matter in the neuroscientific context, see Adina Roskies, "Neuroscientific Challenges to Free Will and Responsibility," *Trends in Cognitive Science* 10, no. 9 (2006): 419-23; Adina Roskies, "How Does Neuroscience Affect Our Conception of Volition," *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 33 (2010): 109-30. and in a different vein, Christof Koch, *Consciousness: Confessions of a Romantic Reductionist* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), Ch. 7.

[10] Christopher Franklin, "The Scientific Plausibility of Libertarianism," *Unpublished manuscript* (In progress). See also Christof Koch, *Consciousness*, pp. 98-102.

[11] Even if we thought that group identification played some role in my disposition to believe things, it wouldn't obviously be sufficient to fund a complete story about my views about the aesthetics of the hylomorphic theory, my favorite brand of orange juice, or my preferred percentage of cotton in clothes. How much it plays a role in these things seems like a matter that would be crucial for Lee and Harris if they want to convince us that their approach has the resources to be interestingly explanatory.

[12] For some examples of academics who have changed their minds about the nature and existence of free will, see Hilary Bok, *Freedom and Responsibility* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Tamler Sommers, *Relative Justice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Manuel Vargas, "Interview," in *Philosophy of Action: Five Questions* (USA: Automatic/VIP Press, 2009).

[13] There is some evidence of motivated reasoning in the free will debate, just not of the sort that appeals to disciplinary identity. Shaun Nichols has argued that a quantitative analysis of the historical record in philosophy suggests that people have held compatibilism to be true because they wanted it to be true. See Shaun Nichols, "The Rise of Compatibilism: A Case Study in Quantitative History of Philosophy," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31 (2007): 260-70.

[14] Hazel Markus, and Elissa Wurf, "The Dynamic Self-Concept: A Social Psychological Perspective," *Annual Review of Psychology* 38 (1987): 299-337; Constatine Sedikides, et al., "Individual Self, Relational Self, Collective Self: Hierarchical Ordering of the Tripartite Self," *Psychological Studies* 56, no. 1 (2011): 98-107.

[15] Randall Collins, in his monumental work on these issues argues that there are discrete conditions under which there is pressure to differentiate and pressure to synthesize views. See Randall Collins, *Sociology of Philosophies*.

[16] Researchers on the sociology of the academy have noted that philosophy has a distinctive "evaluative culture" Michele Lamont, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment,* p. 65. Various scholars outside of philosophy have held that there was something atypical about philosophers in their focus on logic, rationality, and argumentation, including Deanna. Kuhn, *The Skills of Argument* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Jonathan Haidt, and Fredrik Bjorklund, "Social Intuitionists Answer Six Questions About Moral Psychology," in *Moral Psychology, Volume Two: The Cognitive Science of Morality: Intuition and Diversity*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). However, if such claims are right (I'm skeptical), it suggests that at least with respect to academic work on free will, there are no easy generalizations to be had about belief convergence internal to the participant academic fields.

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