



Max Weber Lecture

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“My brain made me do it!”— When neuroscientists think they can do philosophy

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Abstract:

Some philosophers and neuroscientists (and others) have been saying that “science shows that we don’t have free will.” Is this true? If so, wouldn’t this undermine not just our system of law but even our sense of ourselves as responsible agents, eligible for both praise and blame?

It would, but it isn’t true; the shocking “discoveries” have been misrepresented and misinterpreted, by both scientists and philosophers. Since free will matters to people—and should matter—these contributions to public misunderstanding are regrettable and even, sometimes, irresponsible. When we clarify the issues we see that we will have to make some significant adjustments to our understanding of moral responsibility, allowing for more differences in moral competence than our traditional understanding recognizes. (We have always exempted small children and the clearly mentally disabled from full responsibility. We will need to re-tune our thresholds in the light of new evidence, but this will not involve any revolutionary changes in our world view.)