
Beyond Positive Illusions: Free Will as an Adaptive Misbelief

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Abstract

Taylor and Brown have identify a number of positive biases mentally healthy individuals tend to have, challenging the claim that good mental health is correlated with holding mostly true beliefs. Likewise, McKay and Dennett argue that these positive biases are adaptive misbeliefs, where the misbeliefs are fitness increasing in and of themselves, independent of the system that produces them. It has been suggested by Randolph-Seng that one's belief in free will may be correctly regarded as a further example of adaptive misbelief. While McKay and Dennett argue that one's belief in free will should be regarded as a true belief, not an adaptive misbelief, I argue that their rebuttal is not sufficient. In their own arguments, adaptive misbeliefs are correctly regarded as ungrounded, where the benefits are accrued regardless of their veracity. As such, the veracity of one's belief in free will must be separated from one's experience of control and McKay and Dennett fail to adequately challenge the issue at hand. I propose that we should examine from where one derives one's belief in free will, while remaining agnostic towards the veracity of the belief. In accepting that one derives a belief in control from one's experience of control resulting from a subset of cognitive systems termed "controlled systems", we have evidence for a cognitive system that produces an ungrounded belief in free will; this belief in free will is fitness increasing in and of itself and should be correctly regarded as an adaptive misbelief.

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