

Volition, Agency and Values: Can Cognitive Neuroscience Tell Us Anything Relevant for Ethics?

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All human societies have some concept of responsibility for action. Often this concept is based on assumptions that individuals choose whether, when and how they act, that they are aware of what they are doing, and that they experience some active and conscious control over the outcomes of their actions. All these assumptions have been challenged by recent work in neuroscience. Modern neuroscience often emphasises a determinism about action that appears to restrict and complicate the space for ethical views of human action. I will review some recent work that softens this apparent clash, by showing that people have a genuine awareness of intention, that this awareness is linked to specific brain processes of movement preparation, that the valence of outcomes forms part of the sense of agency, and that the human brain houses a mechanism for learning appropriate sense of agency. The raw material of ethics may be present in, or available to, the action control systems of the healthy adult human brain.