Neuroscience and the Law
Free will, responsibility and punishment

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This project focused on bringing together academics to debate the effect that recent advances in neuroscience may have on legal matters, especially with regard to legal and moral responsibility. A large part of the purpose of this project was to identify and begin to forge collaborative relationships between lawyers, philosophers and neuroscientists interested in questions of responsibility.
Over the last ten years or so there has been a considerable amount of debate, in the media as well as in academic and legal circles, concerning the actual and potential impact of advances in neuroscience on legal matters – in particular in the areas of legal responsibility, mitigation, and the assessment of risk of reoffending. At the same time, there has been a corresponding debate about the relevance of the findings of neuroscience to more philosophical questions concerning freedom of the will and moral responsibility.

Two large-scale research projects in the US have focussed, relatively independently, on these two areas of debate, with the MacArthur Foundation’s Research Network on Law and Neuroscience (www.neurolaw.org) focussing on the first and the Templeton Foundation’s Big Questions in Free Will programme funding several interdisciplinary projects on the science of free will (www.freewillandscience.com).

‘Neuroscience and the Law: Free will, responsibility and punishment’ took some first steps towards bringing these two areas of debate together in a UK context, focussing on the notion of responsibility. It was conceived primarily as a ‘scoping study’ to review existing research and, through three project workshops, to begin to forge new collaborative interdisciplinary relationships.

The primary achievement of the project was the development of an international network of interdisciplinary researchers, especially early career researchers. The workshops, for which the investigators issued calls for papers, included participants from the US, Belgium, Sweden, Germany and Italy.

The outputs for this project include a 5000-word report by the investigators (Beebee & Godman 2012), which outlines in more detail the issues discussed at the workshops.

The project has also led to the investigators submitting a proposal to the Science in Culture Large Grants scheme. This application incorporates three strands, two of which stem from this exploratory award. These strands are neuroscience and legal responsibility, psychiatry and moral responsibility, and epidemiology and causal responsibility in legal contexts.

For further information or to view the workshop presentations and audio podcasts and the project report please visit the project website: http://ahrcfreewill.wordpress.com

In particular, the project enabled us to assemble a team of researchers from philosophy, law, neuroscience and psychiatry to apply for funding for a much larger interdisciplinary project under the Science in Culture theme.”

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