



Teeside SitP

Open-Mike Night

4<sup>th</sup> August 2016

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Me & My Free Will

#### Introduction

- Me and where I'm coming from (1 min)
- My general agenda and typical examples of interest (1 min)
- One specific example topic for today *Denial of Free Will* (5 mins)
- Q&A (5 mins)

# Me & My Free Will – *Me* Then

## **Early Life** - Science “Geek” at school Maths / Phys / Chem / Bio

- eg Carl Sagan (Cosmos) / Jacob Bronowski (Ascent of Man) influential
- Atheist & Secularist all my 60-year life. Humanist since 1981.

## **Day Job** - Engineer & Technologist since 1977

- Obviously physical science based, but “*ingenuity*” also about getting things done with people & management generally.
- Lived and worked in Australia, USA & Norway & well-travelled, Russia, China, South-East Asia, Middle-East, South America.

## **Life's Work** – ongoing project researching Knowledge

- Blogging as “Psybertron” *since 9/11* 2001. [www.psybertron.org](http://www.psybertron.org)  
“*What, why and how do we know?*”
- And as [@psybertron](https://twitter.com/psybertron) on Twitter:  
“*Equal-opportunity infidel. Keeping science and humanism honest*”

# Me & My Free Will – *Me* Now

**Member pro-humanism, secularism & rationalism organisations**

[BHA](#) / [NSS](#) / [Conway Hall Ethical Society](#) / [SITP](#) etc. – and active in local groups.

**Supporter of pro-science campaigns**

[Sense-About-Science](#) / [Ask-For-Evidence](#) etc.

**Trustee & Board Member**

of the [Rationalist Association](#) / [New Humanist Magazine](#).

**Plus Academic Research ...**

[Reading, writing and events](#). Not just Science & Technology but also humanities in general, literature, history, politics and **philosophy & metaphysics** generally, philosophy of science and in particular

- **Ontology** (what **exists** in the world)
- **Epistemology** (the significance of what we can **know** about the world)
- **Ethics & Quality** (what **should** we do for the best)

**Sceptical Position - For “Science and Rationality” but against “Scientism”.**

The narrow dogma – or *arrogance* - that science and objective logic is **the** privileged answer to anything and everything that matters (after [Wittgenstein, Gödel](#), etc.)

# Me & My Free Will – *My* Pet Topics

## **Evolution including Memetic Evolution of Knowledge & Belief.**

Memes & [memetics](#). Echo-chambers and conspiracy theories. Understanding & Rationalisation of Belief, Faith & “Political” Dogma. Simple vs Simplistic; Binary arguments vs Subtle & complex considerations. Attention-grabbing / headline-reporting of scientific “discoveries”. Public scientist “rock-stars” on the one side, social-media-enabled advocates & critics on the other.

## **Decision-Making & Governance – literally “[Cybernetics](#)” (pre-1940’s, before AI etc.)**

What information we have, how we interpret it as knowledge, and how we base decisions to act upon it? Systems view. From Individual choices to super-national government & policy.  
**Decidability:** scientifically, even statistically, undecidable questions (Taleb).

## **Complexity in Layers.**

Reality of iterative emergent properties & “strange loops” ([Hofstadter](#)). Late-binding definitions. Too-greedy reductionism ([Dennett](#)). Broad & narrow definitions. *Sorta* two-way causation. Objective Identity distinct from ourselves.

## **Philosophical (and Political) Problems at the Bleeding Edges of Science.**

Cosmogony, big bang, multiverse(s), inflation, evolution of our universe. The appearance of design. Anthropic perspectives. Scientific dogma. Incompleteness of standard particle model(s). Physics as information. Reality of time & causation. Maths as part of the universe and its history. The evolution of laws and constants. ([Unger & Smolin](#), [Nagel](#), [Sheldrake](#))

**God & Faith vs Science & Reason “Wars”.** The Four Horsemen, Islamism, etc. (‘nuff said)

**Brain-Mind, Consciousness & Free-Will.** (Next ....)



- We naturally think of our free will as real. **Our mind and its workings are the thing we experience most directly?** (Though *obviously* we do so *subjectively & psychologically*. Pretty much *a la Descartes in fact – cogito ergo sum – but he went on to propose dualism which I don't.*)
- We reject the idea that we are “pre-programmed” and we reject the idea that the world is “pre-determined” – independent of our own decisions and actions (obviously limited by the physical causation of our power and influence)?
- Without such free-will we'd think of ourselves as “mindless zombies”. We'd be disappointed ***if we believed our conscious mind and our will didn't affect the real world*** and that our impression was just an illusion evolved to make us somehow feel psychologically better about our actual powerlessness?

# Caricature or “Noddy” argument.

- The Hard Problem:
  - The “subjective experience” of our mind (*qualia*) are pretty much impossible to explain “objectively” in terms of physical states of our brains and sense data.
  - The so-called *Hard Problem* philosophically, Impossible almost *by definition* scientifically.
- “*Free-will is dead. Let’s bury it.*” (random scientist)
  - Pretty much everything ***depends in science*** on the physical understanding that all causation arises from the 4 fundamental forces between the standard model particles and the statistical predictability of quantum mechanics.
  - Every future state is ***determined*** by previous states and these ***laws***. (*Even if something more fundamental underlies these, eg strings, supersymmetry, etc.*)
- This leaves no “gap” for our subjective input *not* being pre-determined.

# The Libet Experiment

- [Benjamin Libet](#) (1970's and repeated many times since – famously [with a live Skeptic Conference audience by Susan Blackmore](#) of *Meme Machine* fame?)
  - The “**brain**” physically responds and reacts to a stimulus 350-500ms **before** any conscious “**mind**” report of awareness and any evident decision to act.
  - Seems conclusive? – that the actions of the conscious mind are epiphenomena, post-rationalisations, **after the event**, but not in the direct real-time line of fire? The “noddy” view from science must be right?
- Better conclusion from Libet?
  - Consciousness and mind are many layered. Information cascades upwards through the layers from the physical sensors to the increasingly-conscious higher-supervisory levels.
  - Various subconscious / reflex / pre-programmed actions are indeed initiated on the way through. Exactly which, depends on the type of stimulation and nature of the action.
- Think of the way our conscious mind acts as an evolved & learned capability. Think of free-will rather as **free-won't**? ([Daniel Wegner](#) 2002)  
Think of a top-class tennis player returning a serve?
  - **Most** of the action is pre-wired (genetic capabilities, developed skills, learned tactics, experience and anticipation).
  - The time after the ball leaves the opponent's racquet is used **only** to fine-tune or abort the service return.
  - We're not going to waste resources on laborious calculations and unnecessary time-consuming steps when we've evolved a better solution to the problem.

# Recent / Current / Topical

- [Unger \(Philosopher\) & Smolin \(Scientist\)](#)

- [\*The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time\*](#) (2015) Chap-7

- “A symptom of the metaphysical folly ...  
[where time and laws of causation are outside physics, is that]  
... sense impressions are incompatible with [our model]  
*therefore* qualia cannot exist.  
But ***the one thing we can be sure of is*** that qualia do exist.”

- [Baggini \(Philosopher\)](#)

- [\*Freedom Regained\*](#) (2015)

- Sam Harris, [seemingly] the most fervent denier of free-will, says:  
“The fact that our choices ***depend on*** prior causes does not mean they don’t matter [or don’t exist]. Human choice ... is as important as *fanciers of free will* believe ... we are not the authors of our thoughts and actions ***in the way that*** people generally suppose.”

# Recent / Current / Topical

- Harris – [Free Will \(2012, my own 2014 notes\)](#):
  - Does he really only say “Free will is an illusion?” or “Free-will doesn’t really exist?” No he doesn’t.
  - He says “Free will is **actually more than** an illusion. That we are the conscious source of **most of** our thoughts and actions ... is false.”
- Dennett (Horseman#3) vs Harris (Horseman#4)
  - Dennett – [Critique of Harris “Free Will”](#) (Jan 2014)
  - Harris – [Letter in response to Dennett](#) (Feb 2014)  
Decidedly acrimonious and public spat between friends with a common enemy, but real & deep disagreement on Free Will.
  - Harris – [Waking Up Podcast– Free Will & Dennett Revisited](#) (Jul 2016)  
Return to friendly and respectful dialogue, but still a good representation of [most of] their actual differences.

# Free Will is as Real as You Are

- Mainstream science conclusion is often that our free-will *cannot exist*. It *must be* some kind of illusion or *epiphenomenon*.
  - To reject that argument one is accused of being a wishful **denial** of accepted science.
  - If [Standard Model (4 forces, particles & QM)] = True, Then [Free-will] = False. Nothing wrong with the Logic, but there is more than one Conclusion.
  - There may be something *missing* from the standard model(s) of mainstream science
- The **denial** of *the existence of free-will* is itself a scientific dogma or arrogance. Agreeing that it's simply **not yet very well explained by current science** is more honest.
  - Recognising the more honest position – rather than sticking to the dogma – is healthier for the future of science (and everything else). Science really does need philosophy too.
- “Compatibilism” – after Dennett - Sure, physical laws are deterministic, but the networks & layers of causation in mind, consciousness and free-will are evidently complex.
  - Don't be **too quick** to define the objects you are dealing with. Don't be **too greedy** in reducing the problem to deterministic rules in terms of those objects.
  - The **best** explanation for our subjective experience of conscious will *may not be* one reduced solely to terms of the lowest physical objects.
  - **Suspend disbelief. We have just the required amount of free-will we can use.**