



Teeside SitP

Open-Mike Night

4th August 2016

Ian Glendinning
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
“*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.**