

Summary of Free Thinkers Free Will Discussion

I am Ron Barry, and this is a summary of an email discussion of Free Will that was held earlier this year among various members of the Lakeside Free Thinkers. I'll summarize the contents of each email in as objective a manner as I am capable of doing, even going so far as to present my own contributions in the third person. The discussion ran from Jul 11, 2015 to Jul 28, 2015, and the participants, listed alphabetically by last name, were as follows:

Ron Barry, Kenneth Crosby, Bill Douglass, John Furness, David H, Stephen Segall, Sunny Sorensen, and John Stokdijk. In the following summary, I will use **bold** font to more easily identify the participants as their posts appear:

(1) **John Stokdijk** (Jul 15, 2015) posts an excerpt from a book by Patricia Churchland, "Touching a Nerve: Our Brains, Our Selves", in to which he appends the statement "I was confused about free will until I read Patricia Churchland," along with earlier emails from:

(1d) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 12, 2015) posts that he recommends to David H the Sam Harris book "Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion", but cautions that Harris is a thoroughgoing non-dualistic materialist – a naturalist.

(1e) **David H** (Jul 12, 2015) posts that he has listened to the first 1.5 hours of the audio book version of "Waking Up", and jokes about exercising his free will regarding listening to the remainder of the audio book.

(1f) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 12, 2015) posts congratulations to David H for listening to "Waking Up", and remarks that after reading it he is pretty much in agreement with Harris, who uses the term "spiritual" in the same way as Einstein, and that almost everyone else among the Lakeside Free Thinkers, with the exception of Ken Crosby, also agrees. Douglass also mentions the quarrel between Harris and Dennett about Dennett's review of Harris's book "Free Will".

(1g) **David H** (Jul 14, 2015) posts that he has watched three videos, by Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Susan Blackmore. (The videos are, respectively, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZLyYq_QQ3g , <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGPIzSe5cAU>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHP6fWwVqrk>).

(David H, in a personal message, has informed me that the Dennett video above is not the original one, but that it addresses the same issues as those of Sam Harris's concept of free will being an illusion because it is deterministic.) In general, David H finds Harris's talk disconnected in tying free will to justice and punishment, and in using the free will debate as a sword against religion, he finds Dennett's talk heady, clear, and unbiased, and he finds Blackmore's talk even clearer, and directed more toward scientists, most interesting of all in discussing how people (viewed as sentient robots), even those who agree that free will is an illusion, are not able to let go of the idea of having free will.

(2) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 15, 2015) posts his conviction that "Free will or the lack of it is still an open question." He thinks that Patricia Churchland has a point in her criticism of those who are in a rush to sell books in order to be among the first to spread the news about the non-existence of free will, and that the science of this is still a work in progress. However, he also states that Patricia Churchland is a philosopher, and not a neuroscientist like her husband Paul. (Note: Neither Patricia nor Paul Churchland are neuroscientists; however, their two children, Mark and Anne, are neuroscientists.) He has read neuroscientist Sam Harris's book "Free Will", and is very interested in following further developments in the debate.

(3) **Ron Barry** (Jul 15, 2015) posts his conviction that the question of free will is not an open one, and includes in support of his claim a lengthy excerpt from an essay that he has been composing for some time on the subject of consciousness, free will, and associated topics. The excerpt begins with Antonio Damasio's rationale for why we need consciousness, taken from his book "The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness".

He follows with a statement of Hume's Fork (*Either our actions are determined, in which case we are not responsible for them, or they are the result of random events, in which case we are not*

responsible for them.), with the substitution of “we have no free will” for “we are not responsible for them”, and concludes with a description of Benjamin Libet’s experiments, in which the results were that the brain starts doing something first, then the person becomes conscious of wanting to do a motor action, then the person reports becoming aware of the motor action, and finally the motor action occurs.

He concludes the excerpt by mentioning recent research that has shown that the outcome of a decision can be predicted from brain activity for from 7 to 10 seconds before the decision enters awareness. Finally, he concludes from all of the previous material that although there is an experience of free will that accompanies action, the action is caused before the experience, by neuronal activity, and that this demonstrates both theoretically and experimentally that conscious free will as a causal agent does not exist, leaving experiential free will as an illusion.

(4) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 15, 2015) posts his congratulations to Ron Barry for the post in (3), and includes a link to Sam Harris’s Caltech talk on free will.

(5) **Sunny Sorensen** (Jul 15, 2015) posts the question “If free will is akin to acting on your own conscience rather than a social, governmental, or religious law, would it be free will?” Then he goes to give examples of how we are the product of how we have been conditioned by the Church and various other environmental and psychological stimuli to be socially acceptable, and how that conditioning creates restrictions and boundaries rather than freedom.

(6) **Ron Barry** (Jul 15, 2015) posts his congratulations to Sunny Sorensen for the post in (5), and recommends Bruce Hood’s book “The Self Illusion: How the Social Brain Creates Identity”, as a source of answers for the questions that Sunny raises.

(7) **David H** (Jul 15, 2015) posts his opinion that Sam Harris and Ron Barry have the same agenda, and that he himself feels that “Free Will at its base has nothing to do with Religion however that’s the energy”. He elaborates by making two points:

#1 Free will is the ability to choose between different possible courses of action.

#2 Free will is closely linked to the concepts of responsibility, praise, guilt, sin, etc.

At the end of his post, he includes an attachment titled “FREE WILL 2”, in MS Word format.

(8) **David H** (Jul 15, 2015) posts his congratulations to Sunny Sorensen for his previous post, and although he admits that “in many areas we are in fact robots products of conditioning, genetics, belief systems, and what Dennett refers to as competency”, he asks the question “if there is no such thing as free will, what does willpower mean.” He closes his post by a reference to the semantic problem in defining free will by saying that “This emphasis upon words has led some philosophers to claim the problem is merely verbal and thus a pseudo-problem.”

(9) **Ron Barry** (Jul 16, 2015) posts a response to David H’s post in (7) in which he asks David H to consider that the activity of human minds, whether conscious or otherwise, is the product of neuronal activity in their brains, and that since neurons obey the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, just as is the case for every action in the material world, to believe otherwise is to believe that “free will” is magic. Ron then asks if David H believes in magic.

Next, Ron points out that retributive justifications for punishing people for antisocial acts are not necessary except in a religious context, although that is not to say that sociopaths are immune from being incarcerated or otherwise prevented from having deleterious effects on society. Instead of punishing them for being sinners, they could be considered badly programmed robots.

Ron concludes his post with another excerpt from the essay mentioned in (3), in which he connects the concept of free will as an illusion with other useful illusions in our lives – the solidity of chairs, the colors of traffic lights, our visual experience of the uprightness of the world – all of which are known to science to be ultimately false, then Buddha’s great realization of dependent origination, followed by his doctrine of ‘not-self’, and finally the moral consequences of the concept of free will as an illusion.

(10) **David H** (Jul 16, 2015) posts three statements from Bill Douglass (2), each followed by David's agreement or disagreement:

"Free will or lack of it is still an open question."

Agree

"The SCIENCE of this is a work in progress."

Agree

"Her (Patricia Churchland) criticism comes from her as a Philosopher, which is what she is, and not from the findings Neuroscience."

Disagree. It was not a criticism, it was talking about a concept philosophers have investigated for thousands of years.

He then asks if philosophy is a pseudoscience and therefore meaningless, and decides that philosophers go in circles. Following that, he asks if there is a working theory of consciousness, and considers neuroscience to be at around the same place regarding free will as physics was in 1920 regarding the concept of the atom. Finally, he wants to know if science has decided how many multiverses we have, and closes the post with a link to a BBC documentary "ATOM – Clash of Titans". (Note: Einstein's paper explaining Brownian motion, which led to acceptance of the atomic hypothesis, was published in his *annus mirabilis* of 1905.)

(11) **David H** (Jul 16, 2015) posts a request for Bill Douglass to explain the difference between will and free-will, or point him to a source that explains the difference.

(12) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 16, 2015) posts a response to David H's questions in (10), in which he asserts that David H is still confused, but answers his questions as follows:

"My substitute for religion is secular humanism which is a philosophy. Science does not replace religion but humanism does. You are the guy going in circles and don't know it.

There is a working theory of Consciousness and in a nutshell it is "that Consciousness and the Self are Illusions" They are emergent properties of the Brain.

The working hypothesis about the Multi Universe isthat they are infinite."

(13) **David H** (Jul 16, 2015) posts a reply to Bill Douglass (12), ironically saying that yes, he is really confused, with LOL appended.

(14) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 21, 2015) posts a recommendation (14a) that John Furness and everyone else in the group read the answer to David H by Ron Barry (9). Then after John Furness (14b), follows Bill's recommendation, and describes his upset in (14b) Bill makes a reference to a free will argument of the early Humanist Corliss Lamont, as contrasted with the findings of neuroscience in the writings of Sam Harris, and concludes that he is definitely leaning toward the neuroscience, along with earlier emails from

(14a) **John Furness** (Jul 21, 2015) posts his concept of the conscious mind and its role in free will, with reference to the arguments of Ron Barry (9), and concludes that if what Ron says is true, then the whole legal system is 'magic', and finds that notion repugnant.

(15) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 21, 2015) posts a reminiscence of his introduction to the philosophy of Descartes, and his claim that nothing could be known with certainty beyond "I think, therefore I am", and that furthermore, the entire universe outside of our minds could all be illusion – the work of a clever demon, and that we would have no way to discover this, along with a link to the Wikipedia article on "Evil Demon" – concepts that Stephen felt were of earth shaking importance.

Stephen continues with a description of his life strategy in light of the discovery that free will is an illusion – a strategy which he feels would not be materially altered as a result. Basically, his ethical values before learning of the discovery have continued to be his ethical values after learning of the discovery.

He concludes with an assessment that the discovery will matter the most to church doctrine, since Christianity can no longer depend on free will to justify its vengefulness toward those who will not submit to its will.

(16) **David H** (Jul 21, 2015) posts reasons for his disbelief that the Libet experiments show that the conscious is a slave to the unconscious, and that instead he sees the brain and consciousness/unconsciousness as two separate things which are yet part of the same thing. He offers the example of a computer, which has components that comprise both hardware and software, and that both components are necessary for the operation of the computer, with the hardware being deterministic, and the software being intelligence. Then we can regard the brain as hardware, and the conscious and unconscious as software, with an allusion to Zen Buddhism, whose purpose he believes to be concerned with making the conscious aware of the workings of the unconscious.

He takes his experience of having the ability to make informed, intelligent decisions to be very clear evidence that his unconscious does not have 100% control over his conscious. He offers as further evidence of having at least some free will his experience of having self control, which he believes not to be an illusion.

Finally, he makes reference to the Daniel Dennett video from (1g) in terms of Dennett's use of the concept of competency as the basis of the human abilities to be conscious and to make intelligent decisions, but to go through most of life unconscious of what is really going on, and closes his discussion with a link to a video by Patricia Churchland, and ending with the statement "So in the words of your friend Ron Barry 'issue is closed.'"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPSg2-8VVbc>

(17) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 22, 2015) posts a question to David H, asking why we should be concerned with the Church's agenda in the matter of free will, other than to note that the Church will oppose the concept of free will as an illusion because that concept will challenge its dogma and impede its ability to proselytize.

(18) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 22, 2015) posts a proposed model of brain workings to David H, in which he states that both the conscious and the unconscious derive from neural mechanisms. He continues with his thesis as follows:

"It's not important whether we call the unconsciousness its source, or the brain the source for both: The point of the observation that the unconscious mechanisms seem to have reached a conclusion before the consciousness becomes aware of it is that the conscious idea may not have originated in consciousness.

The essential point is whether the conscious content including will and desire is caused or uncaused. It's pretty difficult to imagine it being uncaused. If it were uncaused, why should it correlate with the unconsciousness? One could speculate that the uncaused consciousness was the source of unconscious activity, but that idea seems to contradict the empirical finding that the unconsciousness seems to know first that of which the consciousness is not yet aware."

After that, he asks questions of David H in an attempt to discover what he finds objectionable in the model described above. He closes by saying to Dave H "You must still confront the reality that you experience and navigate it in the manner that maximizes your satisfaction and minimizes your misery however you define those two."

(19) **Ron Barry** (Jul 22, 2015) posts a clarification of his position on the respective roles of consciousness and unconsciousness, and submits that he and Stephen Segall (18) are making essentially the same claims. Then he speculates on the necessity of having a consciousness at all, since the work is done at an unconscious level, and concludes that consciousness is an epiphenomenon, used by the unconscious as a feedback process for improving its products.

He then speculates further on the reasons for David H's objections to the Barry/Segall model, and concludes that they are due to emotional resistances, based on the common notion that determinism necessarily implies predictability, which is not the case. He gives examples of deterministic but unpredictable actions, taken from cryptographic applications, and relates those actions to unrealistic worries about the computer control of human minds.

(20) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 22, 2015) posts a richly philosophical speculation on mind, matter, energy, space, time, symmetry, hyperdimensional reality, string theory, and the unification of science. (For those who are interested, and have not saved the correspondence thus far, Ron Barry will, upon request, send a copy of this post.)

(21) **Ron Barry** (Jul 23, 2015) posts a one-sentence reply to Stephen Segall (20): "Stephen, this is going to take a while...." Ron is still working out his own ontological speculations on these matters.

(22) **David H** (Jul 23, 2015) posts that Ron Barry (19) is mistaken about David's objections to the Barry/Segall model as being emotional, and insists that he himself is totally logical. He denies that the Libet experiments show that free will is an illusion, and uses the Wikipedia definition of free will to bolster his statements, coupled with his personal observations and his understanding of the speculations of philosophers.

Following that, he relates his personal experiences in being addicted to nicotine in his twenties, and his eventual breaking of the addiction, from which he drew the inference that over a long period of time his conscious decisions made changes in his unconscious that allowed him to make that radical change in behavior. Finally, he makes the quite valid statement that he is talking apples, and Ron Barry is talking oranges.

(23) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 24, 2015) posts a clarification of what he, Sam Harris, and Ron Barry are saying, which is that "even when you have the experience of having a preference and making a choice, the self-aware self - the part of you that you call "I," the observer, which is distinct from your body, your brain, all of the ideas that you have collected over a lifetime, and all of the conscious content flooding through your consciousness at any moment - might not be the source of the desire or the decision.

It's natural to think of that experience as the exercising of free will, especially when contrasted with the experience of two conflicting desires, as with your smoking example, where part of you wants to smoke and part of you wants to quit. I think that you might be looking at those as one coming from the subconscious and the other from the self-aware self. What is being suggested is that they both arise from unseen neural mechanisms, and that neither one was authored by the self."

He recalls that Harris is only calling for the punitive aspect of corrections to be eliminated, and that we will still need police, courts, and prisons, but not to punish, and that Harris says further that if someday we learn how to rehabilitate the offenders, it would be unethical not to do so. Both Stephen Segall and Ron Barry agree with Harris's viewpoint.

Harris, Segall, and I would like to see the criminal justice system made more understanding and humane, rather than continue maintaining prisons as the hellholes that they are today. We hold that only those who subscribe to the barbaric Abrahamic religious traditions view the beatings and rapes

that occur in prisons to be just punishments for wrongdoing. He concludes by asking David H what he thinks of his analysis.

(24) **Ron Barry** (Jul 24, 2015) posts a response to Stephen Segall (23), in which he agrees with all of his statements, and postulates that David H's statements are an example of naïve realism, which Wikipedia defines as "The belief that we see reality as it really is (objectively and without bias); that the facts are plain for all to see; that rational people will agree with us; and that those who don't are either uninformed, lazy, irrational, or biased."

(25) **David H** (Jul 24, 2015) posts references to a statement by Benjamin Libet himself, in which Libet states that he believes that his experimental subjects still have a "conscious veto", since the brain activity preceding the motor event do not always lead to an action, followed by some objections to Libet's experiments that he has found in Wikipedia by philosophers Daniel Dennett and Frank Jackson, neuroscientist Adina Roskies, and cognitive theorists Tim Bayne and Alfred Mele, in support of David's skepticism about the conclusions that have been drawn from Libet's results that it is scientific proof that free will is an illusion.

(26) **David H** (Jul 24, 2015) posts a response to the postulation by Ron Barry (24) that David H's statements are an example of naïve realism with the counter-argument that Ron has an issue of projection in his assessment.

(27) **John Stokdijk** (Jul 24, 2015) posts his congratulations to all of the participants for the excellence of the discussion, and asks Ron Barry when his essay will be finished, and if it will be in the public domain.

(28) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 24, 2015) posts his congratulations as well, and speculates that David H goes wrong in his reasoning by thinking that consciousness somehow exists outside the brain. He believes that David gets his ideas from Jung and the concept of "the collective unconscious", but has no interest in reading a critique of Jung titled "What's Wrong with Jung", by Don Mcgowan.

(29) **Ron Barry** (Jul 24, 2015) posts his thanks to John Stokdijk (27) for his kind words, and assures him that the essay, incomplete though it is, is already in the public domain. He concludes that all that remains is to finish it with a brief discussion of a biologically based morality, taken from Sam Harris's work.

(30) **Ron Barry** (Jul 24, 2015) posts a response to David H (25), in which he points out that the "conscious veto" proposed by Libet does not mean that the veto originated from the conscious mind, but only that the conscious mind (after the fact) becomes aware that the veto has occurred. He goes on to provide a reference to a paper that was published after Libet's death, in which it is demonstrated that the outcomes of decisions are encoded in brain activity up to 10 seconds before they enter conscious awareness.

Ron then addresses Daniel Dennett's reasoning in "Freedom Evolves" by providing links to the quarrel between Dennett and Sam Harris over Dennett's sneering, ad hominem review of Harris's "Free Will", which has philosophical arguments in opposition to Dennett's viewpoint, and surmises that Dennett started the quarrel because he felt one-upped philosophically by Harris.

In the next paragraph, Ron discusses David H's diversion into *qualia* with a quote from the philosopher Frank Jackson, in which Ron disagrees with Jackson's conclusions that science will never be able to describe certain perceptual experiences. Ron closes the paragraph with his own contribution to a discussion of the *qualia* of perceptual experience with a reference to William Carlos Williams's famous poem "The Red Wheel Barrow".

Finally, Ron agrees with David H on the reality of psychosomatic medicine, as long as it isn't conflated with "quantum healing" or some such New Age nonsense.

(31) **John Stokdijk** (Jul 24, 2015) posts a response to Bill Douglass (28) in which he defends David H's objection to the dogmatic assertion by established scientists that the only possible explanation for mind is that it emerges from matter, and that therefore all that is needed to understand mind is to

discover how that emergence occurs. Ron Barry counters with a quotation from Sam Harris's "Waking Up", to the effect that "consciousness appears only to be associated with organisms of sufficient complexity."

John goes on to muse on the presumed analogy between the emergence of a universe from nothing, and the emergence of consciousness from matter, that Stephen Segall (20) dwelt upon in his post. Ron Barry briefly describes his own view of cosmology, in which universes do not emerge from nothing, but rather occur from natural causes within prior universes in a limitless, eternal multiverse.

Finally, John mentions his study of the views of the philosopher David Chalmers, who identifies himself as a "naturalistic dualist", for being an influence in his rejection of all dogma - religious, spiritual, or materialist. Ron Barry assures John that he will never call him a new age spiritual wacko.

(32) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 24, 2015) posts his opinion that John Stokdijk and David H are hanging on to a version of what Carl Sagan calls "The God of the Gaps". (The concept of the God of the Gaps actually goes back to Henry Drummond, a 19th century evangelist lecturer.) He says further that people who use that concept for explanatory purposes serve a useful function until the gaps are bridged.

(36) **David H** (Jul 24, 2015) posts a defense of such New Age practices as acupuncture, and speculates that quantum occurrences and string theory, and wonders why Ron Barry and Stephen Segall don't assume that those are possible factors regarding consciousness and free will. He closes with a link to an article titled "Experimental Support of Spin-mediated Consciousness Theory from Various Sources". <http://jcer.com/index.php/jcj/article/view/110>.

(39) **David H** (Jul 25, 2015) posts a reply to Stephen Segall (23) in which he uses the Wikipedia definition of free will – "Free will is the ability to choose between different possible courses of action." – and then takes issue with the word "action" as used by Sam Harris in his criticism of the criminal justice system. David, based on his own experiences as a nicotine addict in his youth, believes that taking different possible courses of action depends on whether the actor is acting out of compulsion or desire, and if that is the case, then Harris's concept of free will as an illusion has been refuted.

He continues by modifying Stephen's phrase "he [Harris] is calling for the punitive aspect of corrections to be eliminated, which is a notion rooted in the religious idea that we could have chosen otherwise and therefore deserve punishment" to read "he is calling for the punitive aspect of corrections to be eliminated, because #1 in many cases WE KNOW people have no or very limited control over their actions due to either genetics or extremely abusive environments or programming (cult), and that we have an obligation as humans to deal with this issue as it is of human doing, and #2 we need to address the concept of punishment and retribution as begin both unjust and ineffective, and abusive in and of itself.

He concludes by agreeing that many criminals are victims of defective minds, and that many criminals make poor decisions, but that they could have chosen otherwise. He also agrees that there are injustices within the legal system, but that trying to prove that all humans / criminals are victims because they have no free will and are therefore not responsible is not an effective way of dealing with criminals, and that the way that he describes above presents a logical, scientific method for changing the legal system, adding that he has seen some changes for the better, but that the system seems far from perfect and in fact never will be.

(42) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 25, 2015) posts a reply to David H (39) in which he reviews once again the statement "Free will is the ability to choose between different possible courses of action", as follows:

"Some people are speculating that the ability of the self as I have defined it to do that is an illusion - that deterministic neural mechanisms outside of consciousness may decide a course of action, that the self is informed of the output of that process, mistakenly sees itself as the source of that

decision, and acts according to that order thinking that it could have done otherwise. Do you consider that possible, and if so, would you call it free will?

What would be necessary to decide if we could have acted otherwise? I don't think that's possible. Wouldn't we need to go back in time and try to make a different choice under exactly the same set of circumstances? If we could do that, we wouldn't know that we had been there before, had made a choice, or if it was a different choice. If we knew those things, we wouldn't be using exactly the same mind. If we left a message to ourselves to find afterward, it wouldn't be exactly the same world. Nor could we know if the message was authentic or accurate."

(43) **David H** (Jul 25, 2015) posts a reply to Stephen Segall (42) in which he considers Stephen's question "Do you consider that possible, and if so, would you call it free will?", and says yes, he would. He does not agree with Stephen's statement that one's decision for a course of action was based on conditions at the time, stating instead that what is involved is importance, timeline, consciousness and present. He claims that the timeline is not fixed – that we need to consider what may very well be hours of intellectual processing about whether we are going to make a decision at some point in the future, and at that precise moment we are exercising "free will as the ability to choose between different possible courses of action".

He concludes by re-stating his belief in limited free will, that for the vast majority of our life, we do in fact act like robots and are totally unaware and don't exercise or display free will. He also believes that all human beings "do the best they can with what they have", that due to the human ability of intellect and self-awareness they have the ability to choose between different possible courses of action, although for the vast majority of time possible courses of action – like lifting a hand – aren't important, that sometimes important life-changing courses of action are either impaired (for some) or have not been processed enough to make an informed decision, or that illness / genes prevent the exercise of free will.

He closes by stating his conviction that if one believes in determinism (Harris, Dennett), then Harris has missed the mark, and he goes with Dennett.

(44) **David H** (Jul 25, 2015) posts excerpts from various articles detailing the negative effects of disbelief in free will (a tendency to confuse determinism with fatalism, a loss of the sense of self-efficacy, the temptation to lie, cheat, and steal, an increase in aggression, a lessening of helpfulness, a relaxation into mindless conformity, a decreased feeling of guilt about transgressions against others, and a loss of capability in counterfactual thinking), although all of these results could be attributed to the confusion of determinism with fatalism. On the other hand, one researcher has found that belief in free will predicts better job performance.

(45) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 26, 2015) posts a reply to David H (44) in which he states simply "Interesting, but not surprising. Do you have any thoughts on how we should use that information?"

(47) **David H** (Jul 26, 2015) posts a reply to Stephen Segall (45) in which he states simply "A very worthy question and one I want to think about before responding."

(48) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 26, 2015) posts a reply to Stephen Segall (45), stating the following:

"Steven,
I will answer your query right now.

In spite of what the neuroscience research into "free will" is concluding.....We should instruct people to always act as though they have 'free will' and that we are responsible for our own actions and that fatalism is a losing tactic to winning at the game of life.

That's the way I have conducted my life and continue to conduct my life. "Why? Because I believe in the Rule of Law. Which is usually based, but not always in a good society, on empathy and compassion.

(50) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 26, 2015) posts a reply to Bill Douglass (48), and states that:

"Agreed. We must live as if our choices matter, even if they only appear to be our choices, and even if our consciousness is not their source, because they do matter as long as actions have consequences that we can experience.

Do you recall my comment about how I thought that I should live life differently if I knew for a fact that it and external reality were both illusions that Descartes' demon was generating, or that I was a brain in a vat? Nothing should change. It's the same here. The rules of experience are unaffected. Fire still burns and hurts."

(51) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 26, 2015) posts a continuation of his previous post (49), stating the following: "That's why I reject Cultural Relativism."

(52) **Ron Barry** (Jul 26, 2015) posts a reply to Bill Douglas (51), and states that:

"I accept Cultural Relativism, but I redefine it from its usual meaning. I take it to mean that some cultures are relatively superior to other cultures. For example, I hold that those cultures that have the Rule of Law are superior to those that do not.

(53) **David H** (Jul 26, 2015) posts links to videos by Sam Harris, Friendly Atheist, Praying woman, and a Christian pastor, all of which except the last have had positive effects on him. The videos are as follows:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMa-0Fjn2sU>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2015/07/25/richard-dawkins-fails-spectacularly-on-feminism-and-islam/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2015/07/25/praying-woman-turns-into-a-hero-in-homeless-man-social-experiment/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2015/07/25/christian-pastor-says-marriage-equality-is-worse-than-911/>

(54) **Stephen Segall** (Jul 27, 2015) posts thanks to David H (53) for providing the links to the videos, and posts a link of his own discovery, "Sam Harris on Free Will":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCofmZIC72g>

(55) **David H** (Jul 27, 2015) posts a reply to Stephen Segall (54), in which he states that the Sam Harris video was the second one that he watched, and that he is now checking out Steven Pinker's views on free will.

Then he addresses Stephen Segall's (45) comment on how the negative effects of disbelief in free will are interesting, but not surprising, and that Stephen would like to hear David's views on how that information should be used. David feels that the holding the viewpoint of compatibilistic free will resolves the problems of those negative effects.

He continues with a discussion of the effect on himself of watching a different video of Sam Harris:

Harris: "Either our will is determined by prior causes and we are not responsible for them"

David H: Fatalism thought process in my mind.

Harris: " ... consider a generic serial killer."

David H: Granted a good example of a very likely defect, IE not normal but abnormal.

Harris: "When we assume criminals have freedom, we blame."

David H: True.

Harris: "... if we were to trade atom for atom, he would do the same."

David H: Of course.

Harris: "... everything is a matter of luck."

David H: Not everything, those things.

Harris: " (speaks of the tumor of a mass murderer that caused a rampage) "

David H: I agree that it is a good example where blame would disappear.

Harris: "You cannot decide the next thing you think."

David H: True.

Harris: "If you can't control your next thought, where's your freedom of will."

David H: OK, fine, no free will there.

Harris: " (speaks about the Libet experiment) "

David H: Stating this PROOF of no Free Will, I already posted my views (16).

Harris: "You do not know why it is you do what you do."

David H: True.

Harris: " (selects a choice of city experiment to prove we have no free will) "

David H: That proves that I don't know why [I chose that city and not some other city].

Harris: " (states that the only possible alternative to his view of free will is compatibilism, and then argues against it)."

David H. According to some if you disagree you are a dualist.

Harris: "(speaks of how the brain does things without your conscious knowledge, and that therefore you aren't responsible for those things)"

David H: See Steven Pinker clip.

David H now switches the discussion to another Harris video.

Harris: "From the perspective of your conscious mind you are no more responsible for the next thing you think **and therefore do** than you are for the fact that you're born into this world. You have not built your mind." [emphasis by David H]

David H: Okay, that is a very clear definitive statement. And that's where everything falls apart as the assumption is you automatically do what you think and that simply is not my experience, nor does it fit in my realm of reality. That is the same concept for his whole talk when it comes to our actions. We have no free will. I see that as promoting fatalism thought.

Harris: "We can't choose what we choose in life."

David H: OK so choice is important but we have no free will regards choice.

Harris: " (uses the example of Saddam Hussein's eldest son Uday as being extremely unlucky in having become a monster) "

David H: A very good example.

Harris: "Take a larger picture of scientific causality. Our need for retribution is not seeing the true causes for people's actions."

David H: I see that as an issue of perceiving versus judging.

Harris: "We're not truly separate, we are linked to each other. Therefore, what we do matters. You can't take credit for your talents, but it matters that you use them. You can't really be blamed for your weaknesses, but it matters that you correct them."

David H: Agreed, in that we are responsible, I have free will to use my talents and correct my weaknesses.

At this point David H interjects the comment that Harris is using the wrong weapon to correct problems in the judicial system and the influence of religion, and that presented in the way that it has been, he sees more negative effects than positive. David H holds the view that telling people at the end of the lecture to act as if they have free will is not a solution, and that attacking the concept of free will does not cause people to have more compassion, nor to cease seeking retribution, nor to rid the world of shame and guilt.

Instead, he recommends that a more helpful approach would be to encourage scientific studies to show the degree to which genetics, environment (including religion and cults), and altered states of consciousness such as drunkenness can impair a person's consciousness, free will, and ability to choose. He also feels that giving other views – short, sweet, and to the point would help, and gives links to some videos that he thinks are germane:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQxJi0COTBo>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-Nj_rEqkyQ

David H then gives some examples of what Harris might have said that would make him agree with Harris's view, and support him 100%:

"From the perspective of your conscious mind you are no more responsible for the next thing you **think** then you are for the fact that you're born into this world. You have not built your mind"

"We need to be aware that very often our actions are an auto response to our thoughts and we are not even conscious of it."

Then list examples people can relate do like driving 30 minutes to work and becoming aware as you pull into work that you don't recall the route you took but assume it was the same you always take.

This ties into **AWARENESS** (consciousness) as a factor to actions. Then state something like

"We must also be aware that genetics, environment (abuse), states of consciousness (high, drunk), programming (religion/cult) and mental disorders greatly affect our **ability (competence)** regards free will as it relates to choosing **actions as a result of our thoughts and desires.**"

Then list the examples he lists, talk about the generic serial killer, then ask the question. Did this person have free will as it relates to his last murder? Is he responsible for his behavior? Should we seek retribution? Would rehabilitation if it applies, and confinement to protect potential victims be the human course of action.

When we talk of actions you cannot separate what Dennett calls competency and Steven Pinker's concept. To state HUMAN's are not responsible, well one needs to check Dennett's video again as that's my view of responsibility.

Now if it's Sam Harris's position is that **competence** is not a factor regards free will as it relates to an action, and he does not support *'my choices have causes, and an effect – so I affect my future'* then *I strongly disagree with his theory.*"

(56-57) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 27, 2015) posts a reply to David H (55) and states that:

"Dave,

Yes you should checkout more of Steven Pinker's views and also those of his wife Rebecca who is as much of an intellectual as he is. They both are Secular Humanists.

Her full name is Rebecca NEWBERGER GOLDSTEIN.

(63-64) **Bill Douglass** (Jul 28, 2015) posts the following brief message:

To say that I never change my conclusions is patently incorrect. Just for an instance is the subject of free will. A friend of mine (who happens to be a geologist, and is a close friend) and others of our colleagues used to get in discussions about free will and he was convinced that we did not have it. I being a Humanist (and he not) quoted and recommended that he read the book by Corliss Lamont, (The Philosophy of Humanism) who was an early disciple of John Dewey. Lamont wrote a book defending free choice which convinced me of that position. That was back in the sixties and seventies and before the modern findings of Neuroscience.

When the new evidence from the continuing research in Neuroscience and evolutionary psychology began to be put in the domain of the interested science buffs in books and magazine articles (mainly laymen who in many cases were in other fields of science) I became re-interested in the subject matter and gradually changed because of the new evidence by reversing my original position to now being open to the views of workers in those fields such as the now late Francis Crick (from his book in the early nineties, THE ASTONISHING HYPOTHESIS, and [Thomas Demasio](#), DESCARTES' ERROR, and other workers that this volume inspired.....like Pat and Paul Churchland, Sam Harris. and many others. (Note: the author cited is actually named Antonio Damasio.)

(65) **David H** (Jul 28, 2015) posts a reply to Bill Douglas where he recalls that Bill made the statement that both consciousness and free will are illusions, but that Sam Harris himself made the statement that it is only consciousness that can't be an illusion, and that Harris has the same aversion to labels that he, David, does, and likely for the same reasons.

This concludes the Free Thinkers Free Will discussion.

(Note: This summary was further condensed by Chad Olsen to eliminate personal references and non-germane material. Introduced errors are Chad's fault, not Ron's)