

# Minutes 1

## Lakeside Freethinkers

**Those present** Chad Olson, Ron Napier, Henry Laxen, Hank Shriver, Ron Barry, Stephen Seagall, Nancy Seagall, Philip Rylett, Sandy Rylett, John De Witt, Bill Cash, Janine Borgat, Rich Birkett, Bill Douglas

**Date** Sep 16, 2015 4:05pm–6:00pm

### 1.1 President's Remarks

There were several new members present at the meeting so Chad asked everyone to briefly introduce themselves. He then asked Henry to explain the option of converting our current mailing list distribution system to google groups.

Henry outlined the advantages of google groups, namely the fact that it is permanently archived and searchable. As well as making it much easier for the NSA and GCHQ to track us subversives. Chad suggested he get the current mailing list from Alvaro and convert it to google groups. Henry will investigate how to do this.

**Today's topic is Free Will, Does it exist or not?** Chad turned the meeting over to our two speakers,

### 1.2 Free Will

#### 1.2.1 Rich Birkett arguing for the existence of Free Will

Rich Birkett for the existence of free will. He passed around and recommended two books on the subject. The first was Free Will by Sam Harris

<http://www.samharris.org/free-will> and the second was Freedom Evolves by Daniel Dennett

<http://www.amazon.com/Freedom-Evolves-Daniel-C-Dennett/dp/0142003840/>

Rich also recommended the Wikipedia article on free will as a good resource at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free\\_will](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_will)

Rich used the Merriam-Webster definition of free will:

1. voluntary choice or decision (I do this of my own free will)
2. freedom of humans to make choices that are not determined by prior causes or by divine intervention
3. the ability to make choices that are not controlled by fate or god.
4. autonomy, choice, self-determination, volition

We need to make a distinction between influence and control. Free will is not a tangible object, but a concept. There are other concepts that are difficult to prove, such as numbers and infinity. Free will is a pragmatically useful concept. Differences between need and free will. Need food but have choices about what to eat. Compatibilism: Compatibilists maintain that determinism is compatible with free will. Incompatibilism is the position that free will and determinism are logically incompatible. He talks about degrees of free will. Hard determinism is like fatalism, it doesn't matter what you do, it won't change the outcome. A soft determinist is in some sense a compatibilist. Next followed a brief description of randomness. Concludes that free will is a useful concept, and that he believes there are degrees of free will.

### 1.2.2 Philip Rylett arguing for the lack of Free Will

Next Phil spoke about the non-existence of free will. He started by claiming that the burden of proof lies with the believers in free will, since they must actually prove that it exists, while he doesn't really need to prove anything. Like the idea that you're innocent until proven guilty. We all *feel* that we have free will. Phil's definition of free will is "The ability to choose between more than one viable option, in which the choice was up to the chooser. In other words, if we could have rolled back, we could have made a different choice." He believes that free will is an *illusion, a feeling*, and that we should not trust our feelings. As an example, 90% of people surveyed *felt* that they were better than average drivers. Free will is logically incoherent and physically doubtful, if not impossible, that it could exist. How do we view reality? Is reality a series of causal events? Reality is a series of events, and every event has a cause. Even if we don't know the cause, we assume it has one. This applies as well to our brain and our mind. Every event has a cause. In the past it was thought that the mind was somehow separate from the brain, but modern neuroscience has basically overturned this thinking. Our brain is a physical thing and it obeys physical laws. It is so complex it is hard for us to fathom how it works. Our brain starts to be active three weeks after conception. A neuron fires and starts a chain of other neurons firing, but there is no *spontaneous* activity. If there were, we would not be able to function. The cause of any neural activity is the one that preceded it, all the way down the line. You are a result of all of your past influences, and your decision making is a result of this. What appears to be spontaneous and personal is something that can be mapped objectively. He

reference the experiments of Benjamin Levitt, that awareness of an action occurs after the actual decision has been made.

The other part of free will is the idea that we are the agents of our own decisions. There is a sense of agency. This sense is hard to locate in the brain. Studies have shown that there is no locus of thought. There are 3 systems in the brain, that we share with all mammals, that together control everything. They are distributed throughout the brain. The identity that we are the agents of our own decisions is an illusion. It is an illusion that is caused by the fact that we do something, we look for a cause for that event, and it is very convenient that we find it in our sense of self. But there is no logical explanation of how this can work in nature.

His conclusion is that free will is an illusion, albeit a strong and compelling one, and is contradictory to how the physical universe works and contradictory to any neuroscientific evidence that has come about.

After Phil's concluding remarks, there was a rebuttal from each side and a discussion (sometimes intense) followed.

An audio file of the entire session is available at <http://nadineloveshenry.com/static/audio/freeWillDebate.mp3>

## 1.3 Conclusion

An extensive summary of the mailing list discussion that preceded this meeting was compiled by Ron Barry and made available to the group. A copy of it is available at: <http://nadineloveshenry.com/chapala/ft/docs/freeWillFromRonBarry.pdf>

Chad ask if anyone would be interested in giving a presentation to the group at the next meeting and the meeting was adjourned at 6pm.