We live in amazing times.

I know you’ve heard that before but just think of what can be done by a single person with good access to the internet and an interest in a subject. For example: The subject of free will interests me greatly.

Free will is the ability to choose between different possible courses of action without outside coercion. The question is “Do we have Free Will or not”. It’s been a philosophical question predating the Greek stoics and argued over by philosophers ever since. What’s amazing about this question? – It can be solved.

Using the tools available to me strictly over the internet I managed to come to an informed decision on Free Will.

I have downloaded and read many of the popular books on the subject from some very intelligent people. Scientists and philosophers like Danial Dennett, Sam Harris and E.O. Willison and others. I have also read and listened to religious leaders on YouTube trying to persuade me to their side of the question.

I have taken several on-line classes on neural physiology and the operation of the brain to give me an understanding of the physical operation of the brain. Some very good classes are available on Coursera, edX and others. Some classes require a background in math and physics, some do not. None of them are pushovers, but all are accessible and understandable.

I have downloaded, installed and studied several neural simulators using free on-line tools. I am following the progress of the Brain project here in the US, and the Human Brain project in Europe.

My decision is the best informed decision I am capable of making. It may change as I learn more but without the tools available I could never say this decision is informed. It also may be completely wrong but I can also live with that as well.

Scientists and philosophers all seem to agree that free will is an illusion. The Universe and everything in it operate by rules of physics and nothing more. It is deterministic. Religious leaders all agree that we do have Free Will. Their arguments always seem to boil down to “we must have Free Will or our lives are meaningless”. That is simply not a persuasive argument for me.

In one of the Coursera classes, the professor seems to agree with a lack of free will and presents this case by citing experiments that show that our decisions are arrived at before we are aware of them. For me this is not persuasive by itself. There are simply too many scenarios that come to mind that could cause those experimental results to become meaningless. For example: it could be possible that consciousness is not an on or off thing, but comes over the course of several seconds. Who can say whether the decision was made a second or two before it surfaced, or just when the subject decided to signal the tester. It’s still a decision and it was made by the person being tested. This does not preclude free will.

What does preclude Free Will for me is that I understand the operation of neurons to a pretty fine level. I know what chemicals are used and why, how the neurons fire and why, and how they communicate with each other. I see no indication of the work of an outside agent that changes the operation of neurons. Each neurons action is baked into the cake. It’s the result of physical laws – nothing more, nothing else. There is no ‘Ghost in the Machine’.

Once this is accepted we can at last release ourselves from the tyranny of the soul, the hunt for demons that haunt us and the reliance on the idea that blame or approval of our lives can be the responsibility of a God.

So after several thousand years of study and pondering an answer is available to the average person. Now that is truly amazing.

“Either our wills are determined by prior causes and we are not responsible for them, or they are the product of chance and we are not responsible for them.”

― Sam Harris, Free Will

I Yam What I Yam

Said Popeye the sailor man