

Humans – members of the biological species *homo sapiens* – are products of evolution. Therefore, if we have free will, it is plausible to assume that our free will is also a product of evolution. But do we actually have free will? Is it – at least sometimes – up to us what we decide to do? Strikingly, philosophers have long ignored biology when it comes to answering these questions. Instead, they have quibbled about whether and how free will might fit into a supposedly deterministic universe as studied by (classical) physics. Only recently has the debate about free will begun to open up to biological considerations – so far, however, mostly with sceptical results. We are told that it is not we but our brains that decide what we want and how we act, or that our genes determine our decisions, or other biological factors beyond our control.

In this Young Academy Distinguished Lecture, **Alfred R. Mele**, Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University, and **Anne Sophie Meincke**, member of the Young Academy and philosopher at the University of Vienna, will take an overdue fresh look at the relationship between free will and biology: *Can biology help us understand and perhaps even defend free will? If so, how? If not, why not?* To make progress here, it is necessary to critically analyse the arguments put forward against free will in the name of biology. Do these sceptical arguments really show what they claim to show? If not, then there is room to explore what constructive role biology could play in an attempt to defend free will against scepticism. Perhaps the common conception of a biological organism as some kind of deterministic machine is not accurate after all? How should we understand organisms instead? What biological function could free will serve? Taking evolution seriously also suggests considering the possibility that free will may not be a privilege of human organisms.

The Young Academy Distinguished Lecture Series brings cutting-edge scientific topics to the public, presented by distinguished experts and members of the Young Academy. The present two lectures kick off the interdisciplinary conference “Free Will: New Perspectives from Philosophy, Biology and Neuroscience”, organised by Anne Sophie Meincke and taking place at the Austrian Academy of Sciences on 11th and 12th June 2025.

The event can be followed via live stream.
www.oeaw.ac.at/veranstaltungen/live

To attend in person, please register using the QR code or visit
www.oeaw.ac.at/veranstaltungen/aktuelle-veranstaltungen

ORGANIZER:

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Please note that photos and films (image and sound) will be taken during the event.

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AUSTRIAN
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TUESDAY, 10TH JUNE 2025
START: 5:00 P.M. CEST
AUSTRIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
JOHANNESSAAL
DR. IGNAZ SEIPEL-PLATZ 2, 1010 VIENNA

AND VIA LIVE STREAM



YOUNG ACADEMY DISTINGUISHED LECTURE SERIES

CAN BIOLOGY HELP US DEFEND FREE WILL?

AN EMERGING DEBATE IN PHILOSOPHY

ALFRED R. MELE

Florida State University

ANNE SOPHIE MEINCKE

University of Vienna & Austrian Academy of Sciences



Alfred R. Mele is the William H. and Lucyle T. Werkmeister Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University. He is the author of thirteen books and over 250 articles, and editor of seven books on topics in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of action, with a focus on free will. Mele is past director of two multi-million-dollar, interdisciplinary projects: the *Big Questions in Free Will project* (2010–13) and the *Philosophy and Science of Self-Control project* (2014–17). His latest books include *Why Science Hasn't Disproved Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 2014), *A Dialogue on Free Will and Science* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and *Free Will: An Opinionated Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2022).



Anne Sophie Meincke is a Senior Research Fellow in Philosophy at the University of Vienna, specialising in metaphysics, the philosophy of biology and the philosophy of mind and action. Her current Elise Richter research project *Bio-Agency and Natural Freedom*, which is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), investigates the biological foundations of free will. Meincke has been awarded the *2014 Prize for Scientific Research at the University of Innsbruck* by the City of Innsbruck and the *2020 Prize for Women in Logic and Philosophy of Science* by the Italian Society for Logic and Philosophy of Science. She was elected to the Young Academy of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 2020 and has been serving on the Board of the Young Academy since 2022.

PROGRAMME

5:00 p.m. **Welcome Address**

5:05 p.m. **Distinguished Lectures**

Alfred R. Mele

Free Will and Neurobiology

Have scientists proved that free will is an illusion? This lecture discusses three influential experiments that have been claimed to prove that the answer is yes, starting with seminal work by neurobiologist Benjamin Libet in the 1980s. It is explained why all three experiments fall well short of justifying scepticism about the existence of free will. It is argued that anyone who wishes to use the findings produced by any of these experiments to support the claim that free will is an illusion will encounter the same three basic problems. Can biology help us defend free will? I don't know. But I am confident that neurobiology can't help sceptics about free will defend their position in the ways envisaged by Libet and his successors.

Anne Sophie Meincke

Free Will Is Real and Biology Helps Us Understand Why

Free will, i.e., the ability to determine one's own will and to choose between alternative courses of action, seems to be metaphysically impossible: if the universe is deterministic, there are no alternatives to choose from; if the universe is indeterministic, it appears that our actions are just a matter of chance. In this lecture, I argue that attention to our biological nature as agents offers a way out of this dilemma. Free will is intertwined with agency and has evolved to enhance the biological fitness of organisms, both human and non-human, as they strive to survive in an indeterministic world. This view is supported by the current reappraisal among biologists and philosophers of biology of agency as a basic capacity shared by most or even all organisms, and by a move away from the traditional gene-centred theory of evolution towards a new organism-centred theory. Free will, it becomes clear, comes in degrees and results in actions that are neither necessary nor incomprehensibly random. Can biology help us defend free will? Yes, it can, provided that we do not cling to an outdated textbook view of biology, but take into account the latest developments in biological research.

6:10 p.m. **Panel Discussion**

6:25 p.m. **Plenary Discussion**

The discussion will be moderated by **Alice Auersperg** | Associate Professor of Cognitive Biology at the Messerli Research Institute for Human-Animal Interaction of the University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna.

6:45 p.m. **Reception**