

“In a class I taught at Berkeley, I did an experiment where I wrote a simple little program that would let people type either f or d and would predict which key they were going to push next. Its actually very easy to write a program that will make the right prediction about 70% of the time. Most people dont really know how to type randomly. They’ll have too many alternations and so on. There will be all sorts of patterns, so you just have to build some sort of probabilistic model. Even a very crude one will do well. I couldn’t even beat my own program, knowing exactly how it worked. I challenged people to try this and the program was getting between 70% and 80% prediction rates. Then, we found one student that the program predicted exactly 50% of the time. We asked him what his secret was and he responded that he ‘just used his free will.’ ”

—Scott Aaronson

The Trivial Notions Seminar Proudly Announces

Only someone with Free Will
could have chosen a title so Annoying

A talk by
Sam Marks

Abstract

Contrary to the the title, this talk will not be about free will. Instead, I will explain a paper of Scott Aaronson which argues that it is an open, empirical question whether humans are “free” in the sense that there could be any predictor, consistent with the laws of physics, that could probabilistically predict the behavior of a person to any desired degree of accuracy. The argument hinges on the notion of Knightian uncertainty, a type of uncertainty not captured by probability distributions.

Friday, October 9th, at 12 noon