

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

**“Creating Free Will”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 25, 2009

**READINGS**

from *The Human World in the Physical Universe: Consciousness, Free Will and Evolution* by Nicholas Maxwell

[A] rose is a complex physical system that is colorless and odorless; instead of being red and smelling sweet, it absorbs and reflects light of such and such wavelengths and emits molecules of such and such a structure. The reflected light enters your eyes, interacts with receptor cells of your retina, which cause neurons of your optic nerve to fire. This consists of potassium and sodium ions being exchanged through the membranes of the neurons; this exchange process travels rapidly down the neurons of the optic nerves. Neurons join onto other neurons in the brain by means of synaptic junctions. The firing neurons of the optic nerve, on reaching synaptic junctions, cause so-called transmitter substances to be released; these travel across the synaptic junction and may, in combination with other junctions being similarly activated, cause the target neuron to fire. In this way the firing neurons of the optic nerve cause millions of further neurons to fire throughout the brain... Nowhere, however, is there anything remotely like the visual experience of seeing the rose, the olfactory experience of smelling the rose, the conscious awareness of the rose, its color, shape, smell, beauty...

"O fearful meditation!" For if we are merely extremely complex physical phenomena, in the way just indicated, how can our lives have any meaning or value? How can our inner world of sensations, feelings, and thoughts exist? How can we be sentient and conscious? How can we have a mind or a soul? How can we control, and be responsible for, what we think, decide, and do if all that we do and are unfolds in accordance with precise physical law? How can there be such things as meaning, justice, understanding, beauty, sanity, democracy, civilization, science, literature, art, and music if everything is just electrons, photons, quarks, and so on, interacting in accordance with precise physical law? How can the rich variety of the experienced world exist—full of color, sound, and meaning—if it is all just physics? How can anything that gives meaning and

value to our life exist if we are in reality nothing but complex physical phenomena?

This is our problem

from *Effective Intentions: The Power of Effective Will* by Alfred R. Mele

An unknown person emailed professor Dr. Alfred Mele this note that could have come from some of us as we contemplate the effects of scientific discoveries on our lives:

Dear Dr. Mele,

I recently purchased a DVD by Dr. Stephen Wolinsky (a Gestalt and Reichian therapist and creator of quantum psychology)...He explains from the point of view of neuroscience that there is no such thing as free will, as we can only perceive an action after it has already occurred. Can you please help me with this? I can understand that I don't know what thought will occur next. But that that has already happened is beyond my comprehension. Thank you as I am in a lot of despair.

## **SERMON**

Humans have been denying free will and responsibility for their actions since the beginning of recorded history. And for at least that long, humanity has been trying to sort out *just how free* we really are to control and direct our actions. We admire those who exhibit self-control, courage and initiative, the self-directed person who rises to success and achievement. We tend to scorn dependent adults who show little creative thought and initiative, follow the crowd and do what they're told.

That we have *some degree* of self-control seems intuitively obvious. After all, I hope most of us mastered toilet training at an early age. And most of us have far more freedom than the poor obsessive compulsive person who must wash his hands ten times, touch the doorknob exactly three times and check the door is locked a minimum of eight times. Yet, where are the limits? Magicians and hypnotists are remarkable in their ability to lead us, trick our thinking and fool our behavior. Most parents skillfully use ignorance of a wider array of choices to manipulate their children saying things like, "If you want your allowance, you need to clean your room, now!"

The biggest contemporary threat to our sense of having free will is scientific discoveries about human nature. The accelerating explosion of this knowledge continues to constrict our sense of free choice on every side.

Think your attraction and love for someone is freely chosen? Think again. Pheromones, the cut of the dress or the squareness of the jaw all may be conspiring to shape your desire unconsciously. Hormone levels in the bloodstream generate impulses toward anger, jealousy, depression that affect the will. Just notice how your mood changes without that cup of coffee or tea each morning.

Now that we've unraveled the code for our DNA, researchers are looking for genetic markers that may dictate personality traits and character. Maybe I'm honest, and faithful to my wife because of the sequencing of a chromosome. Maybe my tendency toward aggression, narcissism, and perfectionism can be matched to a marker on another gene. Our DNA is finite so I expect it will not be long before we'll be able to map and then predict the character of our child at birth. If you don't like the personality of the child to be, the question will be whether to abort and try again. Or take the risk out and select which fertilized eggs in the petri-dish fit the kind of child you'd like to raise and discard the rest.

The more we learn about how our DNA becomes our destiny, the more people are beginning to wonder if we have any free will at all? Ancient people threw up their hands and blamed the Gods for their fates. Given science has dethroned the Gods, are we starting to do the same thing with genetic determinism? And if so, what are the consequences for morality and individual responsibility?

Ancient philosophers dealt with the free will problem. They recognized that there are factors that limit our freedom to choose and to act. There have always been those who look at all the constraints on human behavior and throw in the towel, declaring all is determined and free will is an illusion. All we can do is make peace with the larger forces we cannot control and accept them, then do our best to play our part in the theater of life. One theological interpretation of this approach might be called the Original Sin argument. Humanity is depraved to the core and cannot rise up and be good enough to be acceptable to God.

Dethroning an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God does not resolve the question of determinism. If you accept cause and effect as the basis for why things happen the way they happen, and a view of a mechanistic universe where actions lead to reactions, we can speculate that were I able to measure all the influences that come into one moment, I can then predict the outcome. This assumes very tiny influences, such as quantum effects, are canceled out and will not effect the outcome.

The Libertarian philosophical school rejects this kind of mechanical determinism because they think it is incompatible with the free will they believe we have. On the other end of the spectrum, the Incompatibilists reject free will because they accept the determinism argument. The compatibilists accept the determinism argument but still believe we can have free will too. So far, no one has resolved this controversy that has been going on for thousands of years. That suggests to me that they all have pieces of the truth.

And science keeps stirring the pot and throwing in more data to fight about.

“Many philosophers and scientists have argued that free will is an illusion. Unlike all of them, Dr. Benjamin Libet found a way to test it.” (Dr. Susan J. Blackmore) In the 1980's, Libet set up an experiment you may have heard about that was alluded to in the letter to Dr. Mele. He asked his subjects to decide to flick their wrists, a clearly voluntary decision that could be measured very precisely. He asked his subjects to watch a fast moving clock so he could detect the exact moment the decision was made. You'd expect there to be some time delay between the moment the decision was made and the flick of the wrist. Libet detected a spike in electrical activity in the brain that he interpreted as the decision to move the wrist inside the subject's head. He noticed the decision to move the wrist appeared to occur before the subjects reported they had made a decision, by what seemed like a large margin to him, in some cases almost a second! It seemed like the decision to flick their wrist had already been made for them unconsciously while they were still deciding.

I found this research very disturbing. Was some mysterious force making my decisions for me? Am I, Sam, the one who thinks he is in charge, just a puppet who is having his strings jerked around? What is going on here?

The question of who I, Sam, am, is another one of those big philosophical questions, the answer to which no one can seem to agree. Some would argue that the actor, the Sam, is the immortal soul, the ghost in the machine adjusting the levers and knobs but not visible to our scientific instruments. Renee Descartes proposed a more analytical version called Cartesian Dualism. The physical brain, he thought, was different from the mind. The mind was not reducible to the brain and vice versa, leading to the body-mind dualism problem. Someplace in the brain, the "Cartesian theater" some call it, sits the master controller, the homunculus, the tiny mini-me, who runs the show. Libet's experiment suggested this was wrong.

Needless to say, Libet's work has been carefully examined for flaws. I read a very interesting analysis by Daniel Dennett in his book, *Freedom Evolves*. He pointed out that the experiment depended heavily on a visual cue, looking at the clock, to fix the time of making a decision. There is an extra delay for the brain to process visual information. I may think I'm seeing the actual time of my decision in my brain which is really a delayed time from what is actually happening. It takes time for light to strike my retina, be recognized, then be associated with the decision to flick my wrist. And associated with where and what?, Dennett asks. Where does the decision actually happen? Or could the decision be a distributed process that competes with other processes and somehow wins out, a version of the same process that drives evolution? Could there actually be no one "self" in charge but rather a large group of competing processes that want to be "me" right now.

This is the shocking conclusion the Buddha discovered 2500 years ago. Through carefully observing exactly how consciousness works, he could find no permanent, eternal, unchanging, self in charge of our bodies. We are a constantly changing, learning, adapting and evolving distributed intelligence that does not have a soul, and may not even have a physical location.

How can we appear to be self-contained biological units and not have a separate self? How can human like intelligence evolve out of deterministic biology? Dennett masterfully argues against determinism and I don't have the time to reproduce for you his arguments this morning in detail. The key to the puzzle is memory. Remembering the past and using it to affect future outcomes creates non-deterministic loops. Intelligence arises out of feedback loops that

permit us to look backward in time to affect the future. Remembering optimizes evolution. Adaptive remembering or learning works even better. The byproduct of remembering, learning, and communicating, Dennett persuasively argues, is free will.

So, if this is all a little too analytic for you, let me cut to the chase, “be happy!” Science hasn't come anywhere near to disproving free will. But that still means there are big differences in our capacity to be free and choose freely.

One philosophical test for a freely chosen action is being able to say, “I could have done otherwise.” The classic example often brought up to illustrate a free choice is the death of Socrates. Socrates was tried, convicted and sentenced to death for corrupting the youth of Athens. His followers bribed the guards to allow him to escape. Thus Socrates was not compelled to die, he could have done otherwise. He chose to remain in his cell and die for freely chosen reasons, that were consistent with his freely chosen values and commitments. The greatest, most admirable freedom we can claim is living and dying with integrity.

Philomena and I disagreed about this as the greatest and most admirable freedom. She thought this was more appealing to male than female psychology. So I asked her for an example that might be more resonant for women. She suggested the core free choice that women want is the freedom to control their bodies. Women want to freely choose who to be sexually intimate with; To choose whether or not to have children; To choose whom they will marry and how many children they will have.

Whether we want the freedom to control our own bodies or the freedom to live and die with integrity, the big question is, can we *cultivate* that freedom? Is there a way, a method, a path, a strategy to become more free? I answer a resounding yes and would argue that, that is a primary goal of the Unitarian Universalist approach to religion. Whether we think God has given us that freedom or whether we think it is an evolutionary property of matter and energy, we can all come together and believe it can be developed throughout our lifetimes.

How? The training and development of our innate capacity for intelligence in all of its forms:

- The training and development of scholarly learning of the sciences and the arts, of history and philosophy;
- The training and development of our muscles and our bodies
- The training and development of emotional intelligence;
- The training and development of moral and ethical values;
- The training and development of courage and will power;
- The training and development of perception and awareness.

And yes, at the same time, we must learn to accept that which we cannot change, the choices that are beyond our reach. But so much is within our reach, so much more than most of us can imagine. The opportunities for free choice to disrupt forces of oppression and slavery energized our ancestors before the Civil War. Free choices for women inspired the suffragettes at the turn of the twentieth century. Freedom for indigenous peoples around the world from oppression, institutionalized by our global economic system, inspires human rights workers today. If free choice is the issue, you'll find Unitarian Universalists in the middle of the struggle.

My challenge for you today is to strive to expand your capacity to be free while also acknowledging the limits of your freedom. What inspires me is witnessing the creation of freedom where none existed before. May this congregation, may each of us, be agents of creating more freedom in the world. In particular, let us honor the freedom to accept social constraints, that serve the good of all, as well as, the freedom to fight the ones we discover to be unjust.

## **BENEDICTION**

Atheist Daniel Dennett declares:

Free will is real, but it is also not what tradition declares it to be: a God-like power to exempt oneself from the causal fabric of the physical world. It is an evolved creation of human activity and beliefs, and is just as real as such other human creations as music and money. (*Freedom Evolves*)

Whatever the real source of our freedom, be it divine design or random chance or something else, let us honor it, and strive to develop it, for the good of all.

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