

The "Illusion" of Free Will?

June 20, 2012 (updated February 4, 2015)

*[Recent [experimental results](#) indicate the
existence of free will]*

I have copied below three recent examples of mainstream media introducing to the public the notion that free will is an illusion. Why is this worth our attention?

I think the elite may be trying to aggressively promote this idea that free will is an illusion and, in so doing, persuade the minority of intellectuals who agree with it that the vast majority of people who don't agree with it are so ignorant of the basic facts of reality that they are not fit to have a real say in society. The elite have learned this trick--promoting ideas that most people reject in order to attack the idea of democracy--well; they

presently argue for example that the [majority of people](#) who oppose same-sex marriage are so wrongheaded about something so fundamental that they should not have a real say in society, that--as they put it-- "It's wrong to vote on rights."

To the extent that people are persuaded that free will is just an illusion, they will find it harder to object to the ruling elite's surreptitious manipulation of human beings. If human beings have no more free will than inanimate objects then it follows that manipulating the former is no more objectionable than manipulating the latter. The idea that free will is just an illusion thus perfectly suits the needs of any manipulative ruling class. (I owe this insight to the author of the Dilbert cartoon for February 4, 2015, in which Dilbert says, "I'm programming our robot line to emotionally manipulate their owners into buying upgrades"; his colleague then asks, "You're teaching cloud-connected robots all over the world how to surreptitiously control humans?" to which Dilbert replies, "Technically,

yes. But free will is an illusion anyway." This shows that the people employed to do the manipulating will find it a lot easier to rationalize what they're doing if they believe free will is just an illusion.)

The "free will is just an illusion" view claims that none of our behavior is determined by our conscious choice; all of our behavior is totally determined by the atoms that make up our brains, in obedience to the impersonal laws of physics. In this view of reality, the existence of consciousness is a [complete mystery](#), since it is impossible to imagine subjective consciousness emerging from purely non-sentient matter. (Some scientists admit this impossibility, while others who try to explain consciousness end up just waving their hands and revealing that they haven't a clue.) Scientists with this "no free will" view either deny the reality of consciousness (as B.F. Skinner, the behaviorist psychologist, essentially did) or they admit that it mysteriously exists but only as an "epiphenomenon," meaning

that consciousness only reflects (somehow), but never causes, the decisions made by the atoms of our brain following the laws of physics.

If there is no free will, then it follows logically that the governance of society is rightfully a matter of social engineering and not a matter of taking seriously what individual people say they want. In this view, democracy is an irrelevant pointless idea. Society should be controlled by people who understand what makes people tick (i.e., how the laws of physics controlling the atoms in our brains yield the laws of chemistry that control the molecules in our brains, in turn yielding the laws of molecular biology that control our brain cells, in turn yielding the laws of neurology controlling our behavior and (possibly) our merely "epiphenomenal" consciousness.)

For example, the recently released online film, [Zeitgeist III](#), which has more than 16 million viewers and which is a very slick expensive production that appeals in the beginning to

people like us in many ways, ends up denying free will and calling for essentially a dictatorship of scientists.

The "no free will" idea does indeed derive very logically from the idea that all there is in nature is non-sentient matter/energy. This notion that there is only non-sentient matter/energy in the world is the chief premise of the modern scientific view of the world. Here's where it gets interesting.

The modern scientific world view (that there is just non-sentient matter) is purely based on faith. It does not derive deductively from empirical observation. Historically, this view emerged and gained ruling class favor in the Enlightenment period of the 17th century because it was originally linked to the idea that the world consisted of purely non-sentient matter on the one hand and fundamentally different divine things (human souls and God) on the other hand. The ruling class at this time feared the "animistic" ideas that (the ruling class feared)

influenced peasants and made them stop fearing the Church and start revolting against the rulers who claimed to derive their authority from the Church. The animism idea was that there was no fundamental difference between our souls and our bodies because, like our souls, our bodies (and all other ordinary things in nature) had an aspect of subjectivity and did things for reasons of their own, *i.e.*, were self-moving (like our souls) and not merely passively controlled by laws of nature. According to animism, our body and our soul are fundamentally similar, not dissimilar. The fact that our body dies and decomposes means that our souls, being fundamentally similar, also die and decompose. And this means that our souls are not eternal, and do not go to heaven or hell depending on whether we obey the Church or not. The Church, naturally, saw this as blasphemy, and relied on the new Enlightenment scientists such as Newton and Boyle (famous for his law of gasses) to rebut animism with non-sentient materialism. Newton and Boyle, themselves, were ardent defenders of

the Church's claim that God and souls existed and were fundamentally different from ordinary matter.

The Church also needed ordinary nature to be completely non-sentient matter in order for the miracles of Jesus to be truly supernatural. If matter were animistic it would mean that such miracles were things that happened routinely and were common place. This in turn would mean that Jesus's performance of miracles would no longer provide evidence that Jesus was divine, which in turn would undermine the basis for the Church claiming to be the one true religion.

In subsequent centuries, most scientists lost their belief in the divine component of reality and were left with the non-sentient material component, stripped of sentience for no reason other than the historic fact (largely forgotten) that it was formerly required in order to defend the existence of the eternal souls and of supernatural miracles. The scientists' belief today in the non-sentience of matter is based on faith just as much as the

belief of people in the past in eternal souls and God was based on faith.

It turns out that there is a way (called 'process philosophy' and first developed by Alfred North Whitehead) of understanding the world, including all of the scientific theories of nature presently held by the scientific community, based on the premise that nature consists not of non-sentient matter but rather of occasions of experience with subjectivity, and no supernaturalism. With this framework as the basic premise, consciousness is a logically occurring phenomenon, and free will is logical and very real.

The notion of sentient matter is partially supported by the view of Lyn Margulis that cells are conscious, expressed in a paper for the Annals of the New York Academy of Science [online here](#). Lyn Margulis died recently; she was elected a member of the extremely prestigious National Academy of Sciences in 1983 and is famous for convincing the initially very skeptical

scientific community that some components of eukaryotic cells were originally distinct independent organisms.

Erwin Schrodinger, a winner of the Nobel Prize in physics for his fundamental contributions to quantum theory, rejected the notion that there is nothing in reality except nonsentient matter and energy. He said there was something more--consciousness: "Consciousness cannot be accounted for in physical terms. For consciousness is absolutely fundamental. It cannot be accounted for in terms of anything else." [[As quoted](#) in *The Observer* (11 January 1931); also in *Psychic Research* (1931), Vol. 25, p. 91] In his "Mind and Matter" essay, Schrodinger writes:

"Mind has erected the objective outside world of the natural philosopher out of its own stuff. Mind could not cope with this gigantic task otherwise than by the simplifying device of excluding itself--withdrawing from its conceptual creation. Hence the latter does not contain its creator....

"The reason why our sentient, percipient and thinking ego is met nowhere within our scientific world picture can easily be indicated in seven words: because it is itself that world picture. It is identical with the whole and therefore cannot be contained in it as a part of it...

"[O]ur science--Greek science--is based on objectivation, whereby it has cut itself off from an adequate understanding of the Subject of Cognizance, of the mind. But I do believe that this is precisely the point where our present way of thinking does need to be amended, perhaps by a bit of blood-transfusion from Eastern thought. That will not be easy, we must beware of blunders--blood-transfusions always needs great precaution to prevent clotting. We do not wish to lose the logical precision that our scientific thought has reached, and that is unparalleled anywhere at any epoch."

Schrodinger thus rejects the premise on which the denial of free will is based--the assumption that there is nothing in nature except nonsentient

matter and energy. Unfortunately most scientists and intellectuals today still lag behind the thinking of one of the greatest physical scientists; they continue to accept as a dogma of pure faith the proposition that there exists only non-sentient matter and energy, even though this creates self-contradiction in their thinking because their daily **acts** of everyday routine life reflect a belief in free will even if their **verbal** world view dogma logically implies that free will cannot actually exist.

Max Planck, who also won the Nobel Prize in physics for contributions to quantum theory (and whose name was given to "Planck's constant"--a fundamental constant of nature), [said](#) in 1931:

"I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness. We cannot get behind consciousness."

Much of what I've discussed above I learned from reading books on philosophy by David Ray Griffin, who is more famous as the leading author

of many books challenging the government's official 9/11 story, but who is also a philosopher and theologian at the Center for Process Studies at Claremont, CA. The books are *Whitehead's Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy* and *Religion and Scientific Naturalism*.

Postscript February 9, 2015:

The following is an online comment to an interesting Guardian article titled, "[Why can't the world's greatest minds solve the problem of consciousness?](#)" by Oliver Burkeman:

[GreenWyvern](#)

[21 Jan 2015 2:41](#)

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Many prominent physicists have believed that consciousness is primary and matter secondary. It solves a lot of problems if consciousness is the ultimate constituent of the universe, not matter.

Max Planck, Nobel Prize for Physics, and the inventor of Quantum Mechanics:

"As a man who has devoted his whole life to the most clear-headed science, to the study of matter, I can tell you as a result of my research about atoms this much: There is no matter as such. All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force ... We must assume behind this force the existence of a conscious and intelligent mind. This mind is the matrix of all matter."

"I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness. We cannot get behind consciousness. Everything that we talk about, everything that we regard as existing, postulates consciousness."

Erwin Schrödinger, Nobel Prize for Physics:

"I am very astonished that the scientific picture of the real world around me is deficient. It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent order, but it is ghastly silent about all and sundry that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us. It cannot tell us a word about red and blue, bitter

and sweet, physical pain and physical delight; it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity. Science sometimes pretends to answer questions in these domains, but the answers are very often so silly that we are not inclined to take them seriously."

"The observing mind is not a physical system."

"Consciousness cannot be accounted for in physical terms. For consciousness is absolutely fundamental. It cannot be accounted for in terms of anything else."

Max Born, Nobel Prize for Physics:

“There are metaphysical problems, which cannot be disposed of by declaring them meaningless. For, as I have repeatedly said, they are ‘beyond physics’ indeed and demand an act of faith. We have to accept this fact to be honest. There are two objectionable types of believers: those who believe the incredible and those who believe that ‘belief’ must be discarded and replaced by ‘the scientific method.’

Niels Bohr, Nobel Prize for Physics:

"I myself find the division of the world into an objective and a subjective side much too arbitrary. The fact that religions through the ages have spoken in images, parables, and paradoxes means simply that there are no other ways of grasping the reality to which they refer. But that does not mean that it is not a genuine reality. And splitting this reality into an objective and a subjective side won't get us very far."

Postscript: ["Does Consciousness Pervade the Universe?"](#) Philosopher Philip Goff answers questions about "panpsychism" in *Scientific American* magazine.

Postscript: In this [YouTube video](#), the philosopher, David Chalmers, explains why squaring the obvious reality of consciousness with the standard scientific world view (that nature consists entirely of non-subjective matter and energy) is what he calls the "Hard Problem of Consciousness." Note that this problem is not

solved by discovering more about the relation between consciousness and the brain, however interesting such knowledge is in its own right.

Postscript: [The Hard Problem of Consciousness](#) (Wikipedia) This presents the views of many philosophers, past and present, about the perplexing relation between consciousness (subjective experience) and non-sentient material reality.

Examples of Articles Saying that Free Will is an Illusion

[There's No Such Thing As Free Will](#) (June, 2016 *The Atlantic*)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2012/may/29/will-neuroscience-change-criminal-justice>

Guilty, but not responsible?
Monsters are born, not made: the latest round in
the debate about criminal responsibility
questions the very existence of intuitive morality

Rosalind English for the UK Human Rights
Blog, part of the Guardian Legal Network
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 29 May 2012 11.01
EDT



Dr. William Petit Jr, right, arrives at court in New
Haven, Connecticut for the trial of Joshua
Komisarjevsky. Petit's family were killed in a
particularly horrific attack. Photograph: Jessica
Hill/AP

The US neuroscientist Sam Harris claims in a new book that free will is such a misleading illusion that we need to rethink our criminal justice system on the basis of discoveries coming from the neurological wards and MRI scans of the human brain in action. [full article at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2012/may/29/will-neuroscience-change-criminal-justice>]

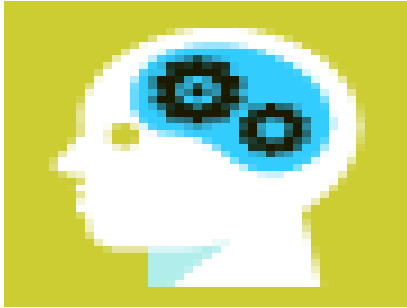
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/is-neuroscience-the-death-of-free-will/>

The Opinion Pages

Opinionator

Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times

November 13, 2011, 5:25 PM
Is Neuroscience the Death of Free Will?
By EDDY NAHMIAS



The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers on issues both timely and timeless.

TAGS:

BRAIN, FREE
WILL, NEUROSCIENCE, PHILOSOPHY

Is free will an illusion? Some leading scientists think so. For instance, in 2002 the psychologist Daniel Wegner wrote, “It seems we are agents. It seems we cause what we do... It is sobering and ultimately accurate to call all this an illusion.” More recently, the neuroscientist Patrick Haggard declared, “We certainly don’t have free will. Not in the sense we think.” And in June, the neuroscientist Sam Harris claimed, “You seem to be an agent acting of your own free will. The problem, however, is that this point of view cannot be reconciled with what we know about the human brain.”

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=finding-free-will>

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See Inside
How Physics and Neuroscience Dictate Your
"Free" Will
Physics and neurobiology can help us understand
whether we choose our own destiny
By Christof Koch | April 12, 2012 | 37
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Image: Photoillustration by Aaron Goodman

In Brief
Most of us believe that we are free because, under identical circumstances, we could have acted otherwise. Determinism—the idea that all particles in the universe follow set trajectories—challenges this idea. Theories to explain the potential origins of free will draw on physics, including Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. Whether or not free will exists, psychology and neuroscience are beginning to explain why we feel as if we can influence our destiny.



In a remote corner of the universe, on a small blue planet gravitating around a humdrum sun in the outer districts of the Milky Way, organisms arose from the primordial mud and ooze in an epic struggle for survival that spanned aeons. Despite all evidence to the contrary, these bipedal creatures thought of themselves as extraordinarily privileged, occupying a unique place in a cosmos of a trillion trillion stars. Conceited as they were, they believed that they, and only they, could escape the iron law of cause and effect that governs everything. They could do this by virtue of something they called free will, which allowed them to do things without any material reason.

by John Spritzler
PDRBoston.org