

December 14, 1996

SKEPTIC
P.O.Box 338
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Re: Freedom *Within* Determinism

Attention: Forum Editor

In the last issue, John Hartung rejected my clumsy attempt at a mechanical analogy to human freedom within a context of determinism. Specifically, he defined "free will" in terms of "purpose", which is a property of living beings, not of ping pong balls. Nevertheless, he still seems to believe that even human beings have no personal freedom, hence no more purpose in life than a ping pong ball. Unfortunately, I failed to clearly show that personal purpose is the very thing that elevates human actions above the purely mechanical cause and effect system envisioned by Mr. Hartung. So I would appreciate one more chance (no pun intended) to state my case for free will.

I'm aware that I am treading perilously near to the "leap of faith" that Mr. Hartung so despises. Yet the whole point of my theory of free will is to reconcile personal freedom with "logic and empirical reality." The alternative for Atheists, Agnostics and Skeptics is a bleak and hopeless world-view: where humans have no personal will, no purpose, and no means to rebuke Fate. Like flotsam on the tide of destiny, totally determined humans have no choice but to go with the flow. On the other hand, my view does not ignore or reject the current of causation, but it does give us a rudder with which to guide our lives.

Let me begin by saying that I agree with Mr. Hartung that, on a cosmic scale, everything is determined by the initial conditions of the Creation or Big Bang, whichever you prefer. From that First Cause follow all subsequent causes and effects. However, on a human scale, we "seem" to have free will for several reasons: First, the chain (or network) of causation is far too complex for our limited intellect to comprehend. Second, our relatively powerful intellect enables us to see beyond the Now of animals into the past and the future. Also, because our minds are "endowed" with creative imagination, humans live, to some extent, in a world of our own making. That's why we can act *as if* we are free—and get away with it.

Such fictional freedom may sound like social-constructivist anti-realism. But consider that a word's meaning may vary legitimately in diverse contexts. For example, Nietzsche's assessment of free will was probably similar to that of Mr. Hartung: "we *are* in prison, we can only *dream* ourselves free..." Yet, if our "prison" is the four-dimensional universe, we may enjoy a generous degree of freedom. Also, some "dreams" are more real than others. Intuitively derived and empirically proven Relativity and Quantum theories make objective reality look like a scientist's nightmare: subjective ideality! Thus it seems that Reality depends, to some extent, on your point of view.

Take my ping-pong ball analogy for example: objectively, 100% determined; subjectively, rebellious bouncing balls. We empathize with the balls partly because anything that moves seems to be alive, and partly because we can't see the invisible hand of mathematical inevitability. Analogously, our imagination and ignorance are our ticket to freedom. We are unaware of the cosmic causes of our behavior, so **for all practical purposes**, we are free to do as we choose.

From the vantage of analytical science's god-like omniscience (objectivity) we are pawns to Fate. But that's only the black part of reality. Look at reality as a whole and you see both black and white and everything in between: a continuum. The full spectrum of reality includes the material universe *and* the mental world—noumenal and phenomenal reality. At the ultimate end of the scale, where philosophers and mathematicians reside, everything is "100% determined". Yet at the proximate end of the cosmic continuum, where ordinary people dwell, personal choice is possible, even necessary.

In our little corner of the universe, humans are able to review the past, imagine the future, and choose one imaginary outcome over another. We can even choose to ignore the dark background of inexorable causation. That's why I maintain that we have freedom *within* determinism. Viewed objectively and scientifically, free will may be nothing more than an illusion. But viewed subjectively and practically, free will is our birthright as human beings. In any case, freedom/determinism is no more paradoxical than the wave/particle duality of mainstream physics. So it seems that we can have our cake and eat it too: predictable determinism and personal freedom.

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to Mr. Hartung's cogent remarks. By the way, for what it's worth, I am agnostic on Mr. Tipler's proof of immortality.

Sincerely,

John Earwood

P.S.—According to Niels Bohr, the Danish physicist: "There are trivial truths and great truths. The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The opposite of a great truth is also true."

2002 PostScript:

Is subjective Freewill real? It's as real as any other subjective concepts, such as Truth, Justice and Freedom.