

Creating Free Will

by Sam Trumbore 3/1/2010 (revision 2)

Opening Reading

from the beginning of "Freedoms Plow" by Langston Hughes

When a man starts out with nothing,
When a man starts out with his hands
Empty, but clean,
When a man starts to build a world,
He starts first with himself
And the faith that is in his heart-
The strength there, / The will there to build.

First in the heart is the dream-
Then the mind starts seeking a way.
His eyes look out on the world, / On the great wooded world,
On the rich soil of the world, / On the rivers of the world.

The eyes see there materials for building,
See the difficulties, too, and the obstacles.
The mind seeks a way to overcome these obstacles.
The hand seeks tools to cut the wood,
To till the soil, and harness the power of the waters.
Then the hand seeks other hands to help,
A community of hands to help-
Thus the dream becomes not one man's dream alone,
But a community dream.
Not my dream alone, but our dream.
Not my world alone, / But your world and my world,
Belonging to all the hands who build..

Check-In

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.

Suggested Discussion Questions (to stimulate discussion and personal sharing if needed):

1. Share an example of free choice you've made in your life. How did that feel?
2. Share an example from your life when you felt you had no choice or freedom to act. How did that feel?
3. Have you been able to expand your capacity for freedom? How have you done it?
4. How has your capacity for freedom been limited? Did you/do you have any control over this?
5. What boundaries have you encountered to having free will in your life?
6. What boundaries have you overcome by exercising free will?
7. How do your relationships expand or contract your freedom?
8. How has having children expanded or contracted your freedom?
9. How as being part of UU congregation increased your freedom? Limited your freedom?
10. Do we have an obligation to others in regard to increasing their free will? If so, how?

Check-Out

Closing Reading

the end of “Freedom Plows” by Langston Hughes

A long time ago,
An enslaved people heading toward freedom
Made up a song:
Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!
The plow plowed a new furrow
Across the field of history.
Into that furrow the freedom seed was dropped.
From that seed a tree grew, is growing, will ever grow.
That tree is for everybody,
For all America, for all the world.
May its branches spread and shelter grow
Until all races and all peoples know its shade.
KEEP YOUR HAND ON THE PLOW! HOLD ON!