THE SKEPTIC ARENA.COM

November 7, 2015

Yet another failed attempt to argue for free will

by Jerry Coyne

*Oy gewalt, and this defense of free will appears in Harvard Magazine, the vehicle of my alma mater.*

Jerry, as an evolutionary biologist, I would think that you, of all people, would appreciate the importance of institutions, like Harvard, presenting ideas that you don't agree with. After all, it wasn't that many decades ago when Christians would have made the same statement you just made, if they heard that you were giving a talk, or presenting a paper on evolution.

If you were referring to a pseudoscience like astrology or psychic phenomena, then I could understand your concern; but even then, the "American way" would not be to attempt to restrict their speech, but to challenge them with counter arguments.

*In a short piece called “Two steps to free will,” Craig Lambert presents the pro-free-will views of Robert Doyle, of the university’s department of astronomy. Note that at the outset Lambert states the problem as one of dualism, a view that many compatibilists claim, nobody really holds. I disagree, of course, for it’s the view of millions of religious folks.*

Jerry, why would anyone even care what Ghost Worshipers believe?

They do not belong in a scientific discussion like this one.

*(The “will of God” bit below is unfortunate).:*

*"For five years, Doyle has worked on a problem he has pondered since college: the ancient conundrum of free will versus determinism. Do humans choose their actions freely, exercising their own power of will, or do external and prior causes (even the will of God) determine our acts?"*

*Now I haven’t read Doyle’s writings on this topic, but the “two-stage model” as presented in the article seems specious. There aren’t really even two stages:*

*"Doyle limns a two-stage model in which chance presents a variety of alternative possibilities to the human actor, who selects one of these options and enacts it. “Free will isn’t one monolithic thing,” he says. “It’s a combination of the free element with selection.”*

Jerry, how can you not see 2 stages?

He couldn't have made it any clearer. He even stated it twice for Christ's sake (I just added Jesus in, as a peace offering to any Ghost Worshipers who might be reading this).

*This is reminiscent of natural selection, in which mutation presents a variety of genetic variation which is then winnowed by natural selection. But Doyle’s model seems wrong in both its steps.*

Jerry, nice contradiction. Here's what you said just a moment ago: "*There aren’t really even two stages"*

Yet suddenly, you now seem able to see "both its steps."

So I guess we're seeing some improvement here, now that you admit that you can, in fact, see two stages.

*The “alternative possibilities” are, in my mind, illusory: they are the possibilities that the actor thinks she has, or that an outside observer thinks are available. In reality, there’s only one real option, and even compatibilists believe that.*

Jerry, if there is only "one" - why do you call it an option?

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/option?s=t>

So in your view, there are no options. We are nothing more than biological robots dancing to the tune of ... of ... of what Jerry?

*Further, nobody thinks that the alternative possibilities arise by chance: the things that appear possible arise as a combination of one’s genes and one’s environments. Nobody, for example, would say that I even have the possibility of choosing to play the piano.*

Jerry, since many people *would* say that, I assume that you were referring to Determinists: "No Determinist would say that I even have the possibility of choosing to play the piano."

And if you don't have even the possibility of choosing to play the piano, how do you explain finding yourself seated in front of one, banging out a rendition of chopsticks?

*What is more important is that we don’t “select” a possibility—if by “selection” Doyle means that we could just as easily have chosen another possibility.*

Jerry, what is your evidence for that assertion?

*To the naive reader, at least, this is pure dualism. That impression is reinforced by something Doyle says later in the piece:*

*"But [Doyle] identifies James as the first philosopher to clearly articulate such a model of free will, and (in a 2010 paper published in the journal William James Studies and presented at a conference honoring James; see “William James: Summers and Semesters”) he honors that seminal work by naming such a model—“first chance, then choice”—“Jamesian” free will.*

*In 1870, James famously declared himself for free will. In a diary entry for April 30, he wrote, “I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier’s [French philosopher Charles Renouvier, 1815-1903] second Essais and see no reason why his definition of free will—‘the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts’—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.”*

*The key phrase here is “when I might have other thoughts“, i.e., one can at a given moment make a free decision about which thought to entertain. We can’t do that, for which thoughts we entertain are the products of our physical brains, which themselves come from our genes and the environmental influences that have molded our brains.*

Jerry, we agree that our thoughts are the products of our physical brains which develop as a result of biochemistry and environmental influences, but you have ignored the possibility that evolution may have enabled our genes, neurons, and mind, to develop emergent properties that might enable us to make a decision from among a group of possible choices.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergent\_properties#Emergent\_properties\_and\_processes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergent_properties%23Emergent_properties_and_processes)

*We are constrained to think the next thought we think.*

Jerry, constrained by whom? Or what?

Determinism simply substitutes "Nature" for "God" and then plays the same tune. Interestingly, what both have in common is ...

that neither has ever produced any actual proof for their claims.

*Further, having read the new Schurger et al. paper that has been widely touted in the press as giving neurophysiological evidence for free will, don’t find that implication convincing.*

*I’m willing to grant that the Harvard piece might present an incomplete, compressed, or even distorted portrait of Doyle’s views, but I’m going on the article as written.*

*I know most readers will disagree, but I still think that compatibilist attempts to resuscitate free will are rearguard actions*

Jerry, what makes you think that the idea of free will needs resuscitation?

Resuscitation would only be required if Determinism had been accepted as valid and that the idea of free will was dismissed. That may be the case in the circles you run in - but it is far from settled in the field of neuroscience; with Schurger's paper being just one example of many.

Jerry, you may be celebrating your touchdown at the 5-yard line; and as numerous video replays have shown ... that isn't always the smartest thing to do.

*designed to make a virtue of the determinism that most scientifically-minded people agree on.*

Jerry, an Appeal to Majority? Seriously?

Even if true, which I doubt, "most" is not a consensus. A consensus will exist when the science is settled; and in any case, the debate won't be settled by a popular vote, but by evidence; something which this article of yours ... did not provide.

*(Victor Stenger, in his book Quantum Gods, makes some calculations implying that the action of quantum indeterminacy on brain function seems unlikely.)*

Jerry, "implying" and "seems unlikely" aren't particularly strong endorsements.

And what exactly do you think that quantum indeterminacy on brain function has to do with the idea of free will?

<https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2012/08/24/yet-another-failed-attempt-to-argue-for-free-will/>

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

Will Earth Survive When the Sun Becomes a Red Giant?

As the Sun reaches the "Red Giant" stage in its stellar evolution, it will lose mass, causing the planets to spiral outward. So the question is, will the expanding Sun overtake the planets which are spiraling outward, or will the Earth escape its grasp?

According to researchers, when the Sun becomes a red giant in 7.6 billion years, it will start to lose mass quickly. By the time it reaches its largest radius, 256 times its current size, it will have lost 1/3 of its current mass.

The Sun will then enter a 130 million year helium-burning phase, during which it will expand past the orbits of Mercury and Venus.

Even though the Earth's orbit could expand to 50% larger than today’s orbit, it won’t get the chance. The expanding Sun will engulf the Earth just before it reaches the peak of its red giant phase. Once inside the Sun’s atmosphere, the Earth will collide with particles of gas; its orbit will decay; and it will spiral inward.

If the Earth were just a little further from the Sun, at 106 million miles, it would be able to survive the expansion phase. However, future technologies could be used to speed up the Earth’s spiraling outward from the Sun.

But life on Earth will be gone long before any of that happens. Astronomers estimate that within one billion years, the Sun will evaporate away the Earth’s oceans. It will eventually return to being a molten world.

One interesting side benefit for the Solar System. Even though the Earth will no longer be within the Sun’s habitable zone, much of the Solar System will be. The new habitable zone will stretch well into the Kuiper Belt. The formerly icy worlds will melt, and liquid water will be present beyond the orbit of Pluto.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

FAMOUS QUOTES

Cory Anthony Booker (born 1969) 46 years old

He is an American politician and has been the junior United States Senator from New Jersey since 2013.

Booker attended Stanford University, where he played college football and received a Bachelor of Arts in political science and a Master of Arts in sociology, before earning a Rhodes Scholarship to attend the University of Oxford. Upon returning home, he received his Juris Doctor from Yale Law School.

Booker began his political career as a Newark City Councilor from 1998 to 2002. In 2002, he ran for Mayor and lost, but in 2006 he won and served until 2013. In 2013, Booker became the first black U.S. Senator from New Jersey.

"Before you speak to me about your religion,

first show it to me in how you treat other people;

before you tell me how much you love your God,

show me in how much you love all His children;

before you preach to me of your passion for your faith,

teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors.

In the end, I'm not as interested in what you have to tell or sell

as in how you choose to live and give."