Sean Illing interviews Stanford biologist Robert Sapolsky

on the biology of human evil and the illusion of free will

Illing asks:

*... in your discussion of free will, you reluctantly embrace a deterministic account of human behavior. You argue that free will is, in fact, an illusion, and if that’s true, I’m not sure how “malleable” we can be.*

Sapolsky replies:

*If it seemed tentative, it was just because I was trying to be polite to the reader or to a certain subset of readers. If there is free will, it’s free will about all sorts of uninteresting stuff, and it's getting cramped into tighter and increasingly boring places. It seems impossible to view the full range of influences on our behavior and conclude that there is anything like free will.*

Illing asks:

*That’s a bold claim ...*

Sapolsky replies:

*You’re right. On the one hand, it seems obvious to me and to most scientists thinking about behavior that there is no free will.*

Sapolsky, how do you know that "most scientists thinking about behavior" ... believe that?

And while you are looking for that supporting data to back up your claim, do you have anything to offer as evidence to support your deterministic beliefs other than "it seems obvious?"

For example, it seemed obvious that the Sun circled the Earth.

It was evidence which convinced scientists to reconsider the obvious.

Do you have any?

Sapolsky continues:

*And yet it’s staggeringly difficult to try to begin to even imagine what a world is supposed to look like in which everybody recognizes this and accepts this.*

Sapolsky, I don't find it staggeringly difficult at all. For one thing, there could be no prisons since there could be no justification for punishing people who commit acts over which they had no control; no matter how heinous those crimes might be.

The world you have difficulty imagining isn't really that hard to imagine at all - simply go back to prehistoric times before there were written laws which prescribed punishments; a time when the only law we had was the law of the jungle.

There is no country on Earth that does not punish criminals, and that is because we've already lived in the world you imagine ...

and it didn't work out all that well.

Sapolsky continues:

*The most obvious place to start is to approach this differently in terms of how we judge behavior. Even an extremely trivial decision like the shirt you choose to wear today, if dissected close enough, doesn’t really involve agency in the way we assume.*

Sapolsky, if agency was not involved, then who or what accounts for the fact that you are now wearing the shirt of your choice instead of standing there shirtless in your underwear?

Sapolsky continues:

*There are millions of antecedent causes that led you to choose that shirt,*

Sapolsky, what evidence do you have that the choice of which shirt to wear, required millions of antecedent causes?

And how would you link those "causes" to the choice of which shirt to wear?

And why did you say "*choose that shirt* ?"

Your entire position is based on the assertion that we cannot choose.

Sapolsky continues:

*and you had no control over them.*

Sapolsky, how do you know we have no control over any of the millions of antecedent causes?

*So if I was to compliment you and say, “Hey, nice shirt,” that doesn’t really make any sense in that you aren’t really responsible for wearing it, at least not in the way that question implies. Now, this is a very trivial thing and doesn’t appear to matter much, but this logic is also true for serious and consequential behaviors, and that’s where things get complicated.*

Sapolsky, so you are saying it's logic?

Where exactly is the logical part?

And where did you get the idea that logic can be substituted for evidence in a scientific debate?

Illing asks:

*If we're just marionettes on a string and we don't have the kind of agency that we think we have, then what sense does it make to reward or punish behavior? Doesn’t that imply some degree of freedom of action?*

Sapolsky replies:

*Organisms on the average tend to increase the frequency of behaviors for which they’ve been rewarded and to do the opposite for punishment or absence of reward.*

Sapolsky, how is it possible for us to increase our behavior which is rewarded, if all our actions are predetermined by millions of antecedent causes?

If we aren't initiating this increase, then who or what is?

Sapolsky continues:

*That's fine and instrumentally is going to be helpful in all sorts of circumstances. The notion of there being something virtuous about punishing a bad behavior, that's the idea that’s got to go out the window.*

Sapolsky, that was a Straw Man argument. Punishing bad behavior is not "virtuous," it is "necessary."

Your way has already been tried. We refer to those times (without laws and punishment) as prehistoric times. They were barbaric.

If you think that society was better off then, you are welcome to set up your own Jim Jones compound in the jungle and invite your fellow Determinists to join you.

Be sure to let us know how that works out for you. We already know how it worked out in the past.

Sapolsky continues:

*I always come back to the example of epilepsy. Five hundred years ago, an epileptic seizure was a sign that you were hanging out with Satan, and the appropriate treatment for that was obvious: burning someone at the stake. This went on for hundreds of years. Now, of course, we know that such a person has got screwy potassium channels in their neurons. It's not them; it's a disease. It's not a moral failing; it's a biological phenomenon.*

*Now we don’t punish epileptics for their epilepsy, but if they suffer bouts frequently, we might not let them drive a car because it’s not safe. It’s not that they don’t deserve to drive a car; it’s that it’s not safe. It’s a biological thing that has to be constrained because it represents a danger.*

Sapolsky, epileptics *are* being punished. They lose their right to drive a car, a right enjoyed by almost everyone else. Now they are forced to find other (less convenient) means of transportation.

Denying that a punishment is a punishment betrays the dishonesty in your argument.

Illing asks:

*So what is true for the epileptic is true for all of us all of the time? We are our brains and we had no role in the shaping of our biology or our neurology or our chemistry, and yet these are the forces that determine our behavior.*

Sapolsky replies:

*That’s true,*

Sapolsky, nice assertion. But it will only be true when you can produce proof that it is true. Can you give us an estimate of when you might be able to provide some proof?

Sapolsky continues:

*but it’s still difficult to fully grasp this. Look, I believe there is no free will whatsoever, but I can't function that way. I get pissed off at our dog if he pees on the floor in the kitchen, even though I can easily come up with a mechanistic explanation for that.*

Sapolsky, how can someone who believes that the dog was destined by prior antecedent causes, to pee on the floor, get pissed off at that dog?

And why can't you function in a manner consistent with your beliefs?

Illing asks:

*Our entire notion of moral and legal responsibility is thrown into doubt the minute we fully embrace this truth, so I’m not sure we can really afford to own up to the implications of free will being an illusion.*

Sean, I would be willing to own up, if Determinists could produce proof that their pseudoscientific bullshit is anything other than ... pseudoscientific bullshit.

Sapolsky replies:

*I think that’s mostly right. As individuals and a society, I’m not sure we’re ready to face this fact.*

Sapolsky, what fact?

All you've offered are assertions, opinion, and "it seems obvious."

In fact, for years, facts are exactly what I've been asking for ...

and I'm still waiting.

Illing asks:

*You write that “our species has problems with violence.”*

*Can you explain this complicated relationship?*

Sapolsky replies:

*The easiest answer is that we're really violent.*

Sapolsky, now you've added the Generalization Fallacy. There are billions of people who contradict your ignorant and heartless characterization of humans.

Illing asks:

*You say you incline to pessimism but that this book gave you reasons to be optimistic. Why?*

Sapolsky replies:

*Because there's very little about our behaviors that are inevitable, including our worst behaviors.*

Sapolsky, that has to be one of the most glaring contradictions I have ever read. It is unfathomable that you can promote deterministic beliefs and then make that statement without seeing the contradiction yourself.

But I will give you credit for one thing: that statement proves that you have mastered the art of controlling ... cognitive dissonance.

<https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/5/23/15516752/science-human-nature-free-will-robert-sapolsky-interview>