

Part I of an analysis of the failed Baba attack by Priddy
in his essay 'Free Will and Fatalism in Sai Baba's World-view'¹

URL: http://www.relife.com/2010/robert_priddy_sai_baba.html

In 2002, an erstwhile² academic named Priddy publicly accused Sai Baba of teaching that only God has free will, there is no free will, there is only free will in choosing to do good or do bad, etc., in several texts published on the web.³

This essay is a response to these accusations, as they appear in one of those texts entitled, "Free Will and Fatalism in Sai Baba's World-View."

First, I would like to point out that in the aforementioned essay, from the beginning of his attack until the end, Priddy fails to document his claims with the precision expected of an academically trained 'philosopher.'

He compensates for this lack of evidence through use of *logical fallacies*.⁴ The use of fallacies to win an argument is nothing new. That said, it is the lowest form of philosophizing, used in order to sway people rather than bring them to understanding. To use fallacies to make a case indicates a certain derision for the audience. In Priddy, this use a) cannot be accidental given his philosophical training⁵ and b) suggest two further points.

First, Priddy places much weight on the value of his arguments in light of his academic training and the authority conveyed by such an academic background. By his emphasis on this, he reveals that he thinks to sway readers into trusting *his* judgment rather than thinking for themselves.

Second, it seems obvious to me due to the lack of academic rigor in Priddy's analysis of Sai Baba's philosophical position in that essay, he must not feel readers will be smart enough to understand the details of a nuanced explanation of his rejection of Sai Baba's views.

¹ <http://www.saiguru.net/english/articles/45freewill.htm>

² The dates on Priddy's published CV suggest that he is a freelancer with no sustained or continuous career in academia.

³ The create and last modify date of the document in footnote 1's source file is 6/5/2002.

⁴ I have chosen not to indicate logical fallacies appearing in Priddy's text by their technical names but have used plain English throughout this document. Those trained in logic will know without fail what fallacy is referred to without need of special jargon. My intent is that this document be readable by anyone and that it not be reliant, for its veracity, on the appearance of authority it would obtain through academic gymnastics. According to Wikipedia, a logical fallacy "is a misconception resulting from incorrect reasoning in argumentation. By accident or design, fallacies may exploit emotional triggers in the listener or interlocutor (e.g. appeal to emotion), or take advantage of social relationships between people (e.g. argument from authority). Fallacious arguments are often structured using rhetorical patterns that obscure the logical argument, making fallacies more difficult to diagnose."

⁵ CV posted at <http://www.robertpriddy.com/>

That Priddy thinks the readers of his attack will lack his level of understanding is evident in his decision to avoid detailed explanation of his views and his decision to instead use logical fallacies to structure his arguments. In other words, he chooses to deceptively frame his arguments using methods an untrained reader might not recognize.

A conclusion can be drawn from this.

First, that he lacks evidence for his attacks on Sai Baba, evidence that, if it could be brought forth, would help a reader come to a real understanding of the stakes involved in the issues he raises.

Second, if he did have any 'evidence,' he does not spit it out, making us think that he has concluded that a real understanding of free will and determinism must be beyond the average reader's comprehension.

It is clear, due to my own training in continental philosophy, that Priddy's accusations depend upon on the reader's supposed ignorance of logic and their acceptance of Priddy's authority.

It is necessary to disclose Priddy's 'method' because he has not been kind enough to show his readers what he *is* doing on one hand (constructing an emotional appeal), while on the other hand pretending to be doing something else (revealing some truth about Sai Baba).

Although there is always the possibility that Priddy doesn't 'know' what he is doing, his arguments cannot be entirely naïve given his educational background, one which he announces at every turn. His deception is all the more egregious given that he lays out the premises of his case against Baba as if appealing to common sense when in fact his arguments rely on highly sophisticated logical fallacies.

With the above in mind, it is instructive to begin with Priddy's characterization of his own philosophical development. Priddy's statements appear in italics, followed by my comments.

He begins:

*There was a longish period when I became a follower of Sai Baba, during which I plunged deeply into his teachings on **karma**, the will and causation, also comparing with those of other more articulate Eastern thinkers and alleged 'holy men'.*

Comment: it is problematic in the philosophical disciplines to come across such a general statement since it does not explain, for starters, what 'longish' means. Did he write a dissertation on Baba? What length of study would qualify him as an expert? Neither does his claim of expertise reveal *what* philosophies Priddy studied, under what adviser, that ground his self-proclaimed authority to speak on such topics (since Priddy himself seems to insist such authority to be necessary).

As far as I can tell, Priddy's background includes some study of philosophy and psychology within a strong behaviorist/social sciences/sociology matrix, with a few published articles along those lines, a bit of personal LSD use, and some time working with disturbed children – all of

these decades ago. It is unclear if in the interim Priddy has sustained anything one would call a continuous philosophical academic career.

Priddy continues:

I had already absorbed everything Western philosophies and theologies had to offer on all questions related to the issues of determinism and freedom, volition and causation, and was therefore unable to accept the fatalism ("there is no free will") that kept showing up in some of SB's [Sai Baba's] inconsistent pronouncements, though I made huge efforts to reconcile these with the only rationality I had come to adopt as unavoidable.

Leaving aside the fact that Priddy never clarifies just what the 'unavoidable rationality' which he has *come to adopt* might be there are serious problems with the statements in this section.

Karma, will, volition, and causation: each of these, by itself, is already too broad a subject for one essay. Given a lack of relevant background for each these specific areas of study, at least from what can be gleaned from a review of his résumé,⁶ Priddy's straightforward claim of authority on "all questions" relating to these topics, in both philosophy and theology, is startling. Especially given the fact that these subjects still present such serious problems to philosophers and thinkers today, his assertion of having absorbed all there is to know on these subjects appears all the more troubling.

Priddy's grand statement that he has absorbed "everything Western philosophies and theologies had to offer" is not only hubristic but appears to be an effort to promote himself as a foremost authority in these areas, though, as stated above, Priddy's CV does not show the related papers, published in reputable academic journals, that could support such a claim.

By calling up the anthropomorphized specter of "Western philosophies," Priddy thinks to conjure up a genealogical relation between himself and the institution of philosophy, thus lending himself the appearance of authority needed for the claims that follow.

In actuality, the only authority 'philosophy' *could* confer on Priddy is that of granting him the right to publish his views and attempt to substantiate them, the right to be attacked for those views by some or praised by others, and the right to teach his views if hired by a university.

Once Priddy lays out his credentials, he then attempts to give further weight to his accusations by invoking statistics and lending a bit of scientific atmosphere to his attack. But where are the statistical examples that he thinks can back up his claims? Priddy refers to this statistical sampling as "SB's inconsistent pronouncements." Unfortunately, he never goes into an adequate analysis of even one of these pronouncements.

Through this type of literary pruning, Baba's statements on the subject of free will (statements that Priddy never examines in sufficient detail) are reduced to simplistic and flat versions of free will versus determinism. By failing to examine Baba's actual statements in depth and refusing to

⁶ The articles in Priddy's CV, except for those attacking Sai Baba, seem unrelated to any of these topics in a philosophical or theological context.

deal with Baba's philosophy face-to-face, not merely in its logical and philosophical scope⁷ but on its spiritual *affective* level, Priddy can portray Baba's view of free will in cartoon cutout versions.

Further, once Priddy is satisfied that he has 'proven' his own authority on matters of philosophy and theology, and in the same stroke reduced Baba's work to that which is contained within 'philosophy and theology,' subjects on which Priddy has just claimed authority, he can then stamp Baba's teachings as philosophically flawed.

Without ever explaining in clear language what he thinks Baba's failure on the subject of free will and determinism might be, Priddy has already moved a) to demonstrate his own 'position' of authority on matters of free will and determinism and b) to add to this the weight and authority of statistics and scientific evidence (Baba's supposed and frequently flawed pronouncements in light of Priddy's superior knowledge on the subjects of philosophy and theology) and finally, c) to use the momentum attained through a and b to establish that Baba holds a flawed philosophical position of which Priddy can be the judge.

Why does Priddy think people fall for Baba's misconceived versions of 'free will'? Priddy claims that most people cannot see past the most basic explanations of free will (and its opposite, fatalism) because they lack the refined intellectual capacities to do so. According to Priddy, these two extreme choices, free will and determinism, which he thinks are the least sophisticated possibilities, will be what appeals to most people.

He writes:

*There are two opposed poles in the sphere of discussion - one for and one against 'free will'. People tend to be drawn more or less one way or another, mainly for psychological reasons. Because 'free will' is a very vague term (i.e. can mean a number of different things) there are many variants of doctrine both for, against and in between. Only the very fewest of thinking people explore at all their levels of sophistication both of the poles....**Only those who do so are really in a position** to sort out the meanings and the validity of the many opinions and the likelihood of truth or falsity in each case. Otherwise, to have any opinion on the subject is merely to choose between two sets of dogma on subjective and inadequate grounds [emphasis added].*

I have emphasized certain lines of the above passage above, for example, the words "only those who do so are really in a position," to highlight Priddy's pretentious view that most people are not at *his* level of sophistication and understanding and to show the either/or standpoints (either free will or fatalism) to which those not at his level fall.

Since most will not have his education and philosophical credentials (and Baba is included in those Priddy groups as naïve interpreters of free will), then most will fall for the most general and naïve explanations of free will. But rather than give evidence to back up such a view, Priddy again pulls out his academic certificates and badges, in order to contrast against the view of those not 'in a position to sort out the meanings' – those who he considers *hoi polloi* with their coarse understanding of reality – his own superior position on free will.

⁷ (the scope and human scale to which he wishes to reduce it)

His own fragmented position on free will, as stated in his own words in the essay to which I respond here, reads as follows:

After half a lifetime's study of what most known philosophers and scientists have expressed on this issue, I am utterly convinced that we possess a genuinely free, though limited, willpower. The scope of freedom depends on circumstances and persons. No one has absolute free will...

In certain respects, it would seem that once he has drawn the graph with 'two poles' all samples would have to fall somewhere along the distribution line it implies. One could wonder where when or how any individual within the line of distribution could every free itself of its 'network'. In Priddy, the distribution, as the materially unavoidable situation, would seem to represent the *condition* underlying any and all 'free will'. Something like, 'you are free as long as you are tethered to this graph.'

To find that Priddy holds a situational view of free will is not surprising given his Continental philosophical training. I will return to this point. For now, it is interesting to note that Priddy must again bring out his credentials (just in case we didn't get the previous memo), and, in conjunction with them, present his own philosophy as if it's what 'any schoolboy who knows anything knows':

After half a lifetime's study of what most known philosophers and scientists have expressed on this issue, I am utterly convinced...

As if somehow this show of proximity to philosophers and scientists would give weight to the second clause of the same sentence

I am utterly convinced that we possess a genuinely free, though limited, willpower.

Priddy confuses two terms in the second clause of the sentence just repeated and uses them interchangeably: willpower and free will.⁸ Why is that?

We will have to see what this confusion amounts too. For now, and as previously stated, Priddy's position on free will is not surprising given his academic training. His conception of 'free will' appears to be a blend of personal freedom derived from strands of French Existentialism, Marxist theory, and Nietzschean nihilism – all of these modified by structuralism and psychoanalysis – precisely the contemporary influences that since the 60s, when he received his training, have acted upon his given field of study, primarily sociology and behavioral psychology.⁹ What do all these influences that I have listed have in common?

⁸ *Treatise on Freedom and Fate, Cause and Choice*. <http://robertpriddy.com/Treatise.htm>

⁹ I base this claim upon what I perceive to be Priddy's specialization, based on the list of published writings he gives in his CV. Rather than philosophical or theological, these articles seem to lean towards behaviorist and sociological positions within the milieu of the social sciences, psychology, and sociology – all predominantly deterministic and *scientistic* (rather than scientific) fields.

They are all grounded in dialectical materialism.¹⁰ None of them are doctrines having anything to do with spirituality, mysticism, Asian spiritual practices or philosophy or theology, Hinduism (in particular) or spiritual or religious doctrines or theories having to do with any philosophy or theology involving Sai Baba or the history of such a philosophy or theology.

As previously remarked, Priddy criticizes Baba and his followers for their vagueness in discussions of free will, saying:

'free will' is a very vague term (i.e. can mean a number of different things) there are many variants of doctrine both for, against and in between. Only the very fewest of thinking people explore at all their levels of sophistication both of the poles...

In light of this criticism, how do we take the fact that Priddy fails to clarify what he understands to be the doctrine, practice or theory of 'free will' that he ascribes to Sai Baba and his followers? Does Priddy think such clarification to be unnecessary now that he has relegated Sai Baba's position on free will to a 'vague' notion? The real criticism seems to be that Sai Baba's teaching on free will falls outside "both of the poles."

Even if one could prove that Baba's teachings on free will were vague, it would not constitute a fair or valid reason to neglect giving a proper account of those teachings in the course of criticizing them. Further, in light of Priddy's academic training and its demands of rigor, the lack of explanation of what he understands Sai Baba's teaching on free will to be seems more than an oversight given his 'longish' association with Sai Baba's philosophy.

As stated above, Baba's error, it seems to me, is to pose a version of 'free will' that is not subject to the mechanistic system where Priddy wants to situation it, 'the two poles.' With no explanation of what he means when he accuses Sai Baba of a "false and exaggerated idea of free will," Priddy now launches into a (grammatically flawed) contradictory attack:

Those who have a false and exaggerated idea of free will (as Sai Baba demonstrates he has), may take it to mean - for example - an ability to do whatever one desires without suffering any bad consequences that may follow, need to learn that there is no such free will. But a free will within limits....

How exactly do "those who have false and exaggerated ideas of free will" take it [free will] to mean? *Who are they* and *what* is false or exaggerated about their view? Priddy doesn't clarify these points. Instead, he moves quickly to his own philosophical position: "that there is no free will. But a free will within limits...."

What precisely does he mean by "free will within limits?" What are these limits? What does he mean by "no free will?" Priddy doesn't say though by now we are starting to see what the 'limit' might be. For Priddy, free will cannot exist outside the continuum of the system of two poles that he has proposed.

¹⁰ It has often been observed by philosophers that the philosophical battle of ideas concerning the source of the cosmos, whether it derives from metaphysical sources – spirit/soul/the Good/God – or whether it arises from matter – contingency, chance, the void, etc. – has been continued unabated since earliest recorded history (as exemplified in the opposition between Heraclitus' material account of the cosmos and Plato's idealist account.) I discuss this again on page 8.

He continues:

But a free will within limits, set fairly narrowly for most people by the mass of given conditions of life etc., is a most reasonable hypothesis.

Who are these people who Priddy refers to as *most people*? And what does he mean by *narrowly*?” Do ‘most people’ belong to the same group which Priddy previously showed to be incapable of grasping complex explanations of ‘free will’? Let us recall that for Priddy, the more sophisticated explanations of free will were reserved for Priddy and rare thinkers like him who are qualified to understand and distribute this understanding to the masses.

It would seem that, according to Priddy’s view, those least able to access free will or to talk about it are the same folks who lack the intellectual discernment to match Priddy’s.

After proposing this ‘reasonable hypothesis,’ in the next sentence Priddy continues to talk over our heads, bringing in the concept of ‘absolute free will’ without explaining what he means by the term.

Still, no one but a very confused person would claim that any person has absolute free will, such as the ability to overrule the entire laws of nature! That is what 'omnipotence' would actually have to involve, however.

In order to step out of the model of the two poles or to move to its outer limits (freedom or fatalism) one must be “a very confused person!”

Priddy has now failed to explain what either he or Baba mean by free will, willpower, determinism or absolute free will, laws of nature or omnipotence! Not to be deterred, and in order to prove his own superior grasp of the true meaning of these subjects, Priddy now lapses into a superficial (as well as regurgitated) postmodern explanation of free will. Perhaps he thinks that by putting everyone to sleep we’ll all sign the spiritual dotted line.

The obvious purpose of Priddy’s highly scientific language is to place Sai Baba’s teaching under the authority of the domains of the natural sciences, thus enabling him to subject Baba’s spiritual teachings to the finite, material plane. Specifically, it allows Baba’s teachings to be reduced to the status of poor copy (in light of the triumphs of sociology, psychology and the social sciences, not to mention physics).

It is an opposition Priddy underscores by his choice of a title for this section: “Doctrinal teachings versus philosophy and science.”

Since Priddy believes that “we can never reach an unambiguous, complete and clearly expressed truth”¹¹ it is therefore no mystery how ‘doctrines’ will fare when brought up against the arsenals of science (now posing as the laws of nature). Priddy pits the two against each other, ‘free will’ being a kind of absolute and idealistic truth statement which must defend itself against “the entire laws of nature” or material reality.

¹¹ In “Understanding and Truth.” <http://robertpriddy.com/bey/7.html>

Still, no one but a very confused person would claim that any person has absolute free will, such as the ability to overrule the entire laws of nature! That is what 'omnipotence' would actually have to involve, however.

The ‘triumph,’ to which Baba’s philosophy will have to fall to its knees (if it is to survive Priddy’s discerning intellect) can be exemplified by the following convoluted paragraph. In it, Priddy expands upon what he means when he says we have some ‘free will’ but he does so by throwing in the ‘indeterminacy factor,’ a theory that proposes meaninglessness or chance as an explanation of free will or variability of action. He then factors into this theory the possibility of individual human creativity. Reading the following paragraph carefully, one sees that for Priddy, even when creative action escapes apparent limitations, it does so “on the basis of the given conditions of nature and society.” It is never truly free. The indeterminacy Priddy means here is not metaphysical but merely chance. Somehow, he thinks, we may overcome chance, but we always do it in the confines of our situation.

Among the misleadingly-named "laws" of nature is the famous 'indeterminacy' factor...in short, laws do not always apply equally to everything. They apply to the aggregate of atoms, but not to any given atom. They may apply to the aggregate of human behaviour, but not to the exceptional or unique ideas and actions! Further, the human mind can discover the tyranny of apparent limitations set by "natural laws" and so free us from their seeming inevitability by influencing personal, social and historical events through creative action (on the basis of the given conditions of nature and society). Human enterprise can change the conditions of life through increasing mastery of the laws and applying them in 'non-natural' ways.

It is no surprise, given the above, that for Priddy, *free will* can only be *willpower*. We can never act freely but always resist the forces arrayed against us in increasingly sophisticated ways. We learn to play the ‘system’ by our “increasing mastery of the laws and applying them in ‘non-natural’ ways”

It is possible to see and break down the Romantic, Mechanistic, Enlightenment, Marxist, Nietzschean, and other threads appearing in Priddy’s explanation of free will. There is no space in this response to explain the entire history of philosophy and theology that Priddy claims to mobilize. What is important is the practical consequence, for us, of the probability tree he assembles: in such a theory, *if*, as human beings it is possible at all for any one of us to escape the clutches of circumstance, of historical events or of social or personal or economic limits placed upon us by finitude, Priddy believes it is only those exceptional creative persons among us who will be able to pull it off! And even in that case, the operation of free will entails “increasing mastery of the laws” and can only be accomplished within the confines of a contained system!

This does not *sound* like Baba. And anyway, Priddy has already told us that Baba holds a naïve view on the matter, a view located at the far end of the pole of fatalism.

But *who* does Priddy cite to support his own ‘nuanced’ explanation of ‘free will’? Baba!

He writes:

To this extent, therefore, one might say that we are creators, we are gods (as SB also insists when it suits him to. Thus he has said that free will is a property of the Atma (spirit), which each of us essentially [sic]

also is: Eg [sic]..."Swechcha means the free will of the Atma. Swechcha in ordinary usage means freedom or liberty. We should not take it in the ordinary sense. Swechcha means the will of the Atma. If we take it in the true sense and follow it up, we will be much benefitted by our action." Summer Showers in Brindavan. 1972. p. 141)

To Priddy's version of "we are creators, we are gods,' I think he would have to agree that we would need to add the following conditional statement: *only to a point and if you follow all the rules.*

Admittedly, the Baba passage Priddy cites is short and out of context, and none of its terms are explained. More importantly, and for reasons that will become clearer in Part II, we now know that Priddy's own version of 'free will,' though it bears some superficial resemblance to Baba's version, *only does so if you are careful to ignore certain details or don't realize they've been slipped in.*

Priddy's version of free will hides within its language doctrines far removed from Baba's notion of *Atma*.¹² It seems to me that Baba proposes a gradual movement towards freedom and that the two pole model would not be sufficient to such a movement. The reason for their difference seems to be that Priddy's two poles –fatalism or free will – takes for their ground or founding principle axiom a *material* versus an *ideal* view of the cosmos.

Material view: a bottom to top model where everything evolves from chance or chaos. Truth is always subjective. (For example, the ancient Heraclitus who taught that one never steps in the same river twice.)

Idealist view: a top down model of the cosmos where order, eternal patterns are imposed by God. (For example, Plato, whose cosmos arises in the Good and for whom 'matter' represents nothing but a world of phantasm and shadow.)

Can a true resemblance between these two views of free will be arrived at or is Priddy appropriating Baba's teachings only to corrupt them in order to reduce them to the status of poor cousin in relation to his own more scientific account? What are the differences between these two accounts of free will and why does it matter?

We have only hinted at the problem.

In part II of this analysis we will take a closer look at both Priddy and Baba's view and then an explanation of why Priddy's account of free cannot even remotely resemble Baba's teaching on the subject. This task will not be simple, since, according to Priddy, if we are to arrive at the truth of Sai Baba's error *the entire range of human thought will have to be activated:* in other

¹² If Priddy strays from Baba's notion of free will, it does not seem that he disagrees with every one of his doctrines. Citations from Baba are sprinkled throughout Priddy's writings, and are used to support Priddy's own positions. It is common practice to attack as well as borrow from competing philosophies in the attempt to overcome or improve them. For example, in the case of the following link, Priddy elaborates Baba's seven principles of human nature and seems to agree with them or at least offer no alternative model. <http://robertpriddy.com/P/8psyche.html> It seems that Priddy wants to bring Baba's teaching under the logic of Western sociology and psychology and philosophy and strip it of spiritual content. This is the mishmash where most of the trouble seems to arise. It is strange for Priddy to rely so much on Baba after previously informing us that there are "*other more articulate Eastern thinkers and alleged 'holy men'.*"

words, the entire history of philosophy. I hope by this he doesn't mean only Western Philosophy!

Priddy writes:

The big confusion can very largely be cleared up, but only by a proper exposition of the subject, one which takes account of the entire range of human thought (and misunderstanding) on the subject. I hope my contribution will be helpful.

That's right. On Priddy's account, in order to show what's wrong with Sai Baba he needs to activate the entire labyrinth¹³ that is the history of philosophy! Priddy proposes a Herculean task while at the same time offering a glimmer of hope that his "contribution will be helpful" to the task of clearing up the "big confusion." Of course, clarification will require "proper exposition of the subject, one which takes account of the entire range of human thought...."

Because the range of content that Priddy indicates is so broad and so vague, it would appear that any effort to refute his arguments could end up missing the mark.

Either it becomes necessary to read everything he has written and refute or approve it line by line or else another strategy must be employed.

Both to make sense of Priddy's content in Part II of my analysis and to reveal what is at stake in Priddy's disagreement with Sai Baba, there will be no simple way to avoid some discussion of the resources Priddy mobilizes in order to so superficially dismiss Sai Baba's teaching.

I have decided that in Part II I will again break down Priddy's arguments, whenever possible, in the simplest language. I may have to review at least some of the philosophical strands activated by Priddy's account but as much as possible I will try to conduct my explanation in the clearest possible terms.

My reason for this, as in Part I that now comes to a close, is that I hope to avoid the need to demonstrate my 'authority' or my superior 'scientific reasoning' on the subject of philosophy by use of obscure language. Some ideas may appear strange and new and should be viewed as historical landmarks that might help us accomplish our aim, which is to clarify why Priddy attacks Sai Baba's version of free will.

URL: http://www.reife.com/2010/robert_priddy_sai_baba.html

¹³ http://www.saibaba-x.org.uk/3/The_%27Labyrinth_fallacy%27_in_complex_belief_systems.html. Here Priddy projects onto Sai Baba his own practice of logical fallacy while at the same time patting the natural sciences on the back because their "systematic investigations [are] carried out in the spirit of scientific reasoning on the principle of minimizing sufficient explanations (Occam's Razor) are least subject to the said fallacy."