

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

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As discussed in Part I of this analysis, Priddy asserted his authority *to judge the value of Sai Baba's teaching on the topic of 'free will.'*

Having demonstrated his authority to evaluate Baba's philosophy – his credentials having passed through the intellectual swipe machine – Priddy now prepares to discuss the 'flaws' in Sai Baba's philosophy of free will, flaws he has only hinted at up to now.

Based on what we have seen so far of Priddy's view of free will and his belief that whatever human beings think of as the 'supernatural divine' or God, atma, etc., ends up being merely "a *mental-emotional construction representing an ideal,*"¹ in other words, a construct of language, it comes as no surprise that Priddy has taken a philosophical turn away from Baba.² His rejection of Baba cannot be taken as a reasoned and detached philosophical objection since it brings with it an entire ideological apparatus.

Someone might ask: why are you so interested in responding to Priddy on the subject of Sai Baba and free will? Isn't the whole thing a bit unwieldy, passé, too technical? The answer is simple. I have responded to Priddy's attack of this point in particular because I believe that the problem of free will is serious indeed and the view that one takes of it affects the core of human life.

Taking a position on this question means that one has to orient oneself in relation to the *cosmos*. It means to take a view on the starting point of reality, how reality works and the human role in it. Free will, though some would like to forget this point, brings into play, as the ancient Greeks well knew, the *metaphysical question*.

On one side of the question, the cosmos is reducible to physical and causal rules. It appears as a chaos or void over which, in some sedimented fashion (Priddy's two poles), a material order randomly assembles itself through chance.

¹ In this paper I have placed Priddy in the camp with the materialists. As recently as January 29, 2010, Priddy writes that "Strictly, the word God has no meaning in so far as *there is no existent to which it relates...* It is a *mental-emotional construction representing an ideal. not [sic] any real state of affairs.* , [sic] not a phenomenally given referent. The same goes for Brahman [sic], Atma and all such names for any 'supernatural divine'... despite their somewhat different connotations. it is paramount to such language conventions as miasma, mirage etc. It originates mainly from (subjective) interpretations of (distorted, flawed and primitive) historical scriptures. <http://robertcpriddy.wordpress.com/2010/01/29/the-circularity-and-inexpressibility-of-advaitic-thinking/>

² See Priddy, *Treatise on Freedom and Fate, Cause and Choice*.

On the other side of the question, the cosmos obey a higher, metaphysical order and has its source in the Supreme Being.

These are two opposite responses to the metaphysical question and they present opposed versions of reality. It seems to me that, for the most part, Priddy rejects the possibility of the second scenario and chalks it up to a form of primitive thinking or human myth, a story we tell ourselves that results from our desire to situate ourselves in a contingent world.

As described in Part I of this essay, for Priddy, all human actions lie on a graph of distribution between two extreme positions, free will and fatalism, that he calls the two poles. Further, he considers the extreme standpoints at either pole to be naïve positions.

The clarification I would now like to make is that in the case of Priddy's two poles, *both ends reside on a material, human, psychological scale, a scale that never escapes the laws of space and time*. Within these poles, our freedom is always constituted by a struggle with material forces. Free will has an underlying material basis.

What's wrong with that one would ask? Don't we exist within time and space? Aren't we material beings, with bodies? Isn't everything we do associated with dealing with problems of matter – like dealing with the elements, feeding the body and clothing it and finding a safe place to sleep?

I cannot object to these necessities: nothing is wrong with the diligence with which we attend to the human and psychological dimension of life.

But Priddy does not refer to the basic problem a *soul* finds itself in – that is, of finding itself plunged in the corporeal reality of living in a material world and the necessity of coping with the limitations of that world. Priddy reduces such realities to 'mental constructions.'

For Baba, and from the context of *atma*, we may be conditioned by material truths, we may even be limited by them but we never lose sight of what truth is superior. *Atma* is always superior to matter, and is the starting point from which reality orients itself. Western philosophy might call *atma* soul. Priddy calls it a mental construction.

Contrary to Priddy, we could put it this way.

For Baba, soul is superior to matter and provides the lenses through which we understand the cosmos. The mask comes off, we see the world more clearly and as such, grasp a freedom neither at the extremes or along the thread of Priddy's scale.

For Priddy, the cosmos is nothing more than a *material* riddle, one that awaits the instruments of science or psychology for its unraveling, and whose every part determines, although in certain ways still allows for chance events or windows that one could call free will, the occasional hiccups that resemble 'free will.' The hiccup of free will, however, is more like willpower in

such a view since to achieve the hiccup one would have to be one of those lucky few capable of mastering the rules. In other words, not most people.

Though on the surface, some similarities could be found between these two doctrines, they have no underlying principle in common. In Baba's version, *atma* rules over matter. Priddy is one of those that believes, even if he doesn't quite put it that way, that *the world of matter or maybe the situation of being enmattered, determines reality itself.*

To one who believes that truth is found in material realities, and, as a consequence, that such realities determine the very notion of free will, Priddy will seem quite sane and the choice would then seem an either/or scenario such as that which he has proposed: fatalism or free will. From a materialist standpoint, one could agree with Priddy that as we attained mastery of material laws, we would be like creators, like gods, on which, says Priddy, "SB also insists when it suits him to."

Priddy is not saying that his view and Sai Baba's view of free will really have a resemblance when he indicates this his theory of free will and Baba's theory of free will would both produce something like 'gods.'

What he really wants to say is that sometimes Sai Baba seems to get a glimmer of the truth (the 'truth' as a situated free will through the attainment of mastery of a set of causal rules and thus, interchangeable with 'willpower') but that Baba fails, because along with his followers he falls into a naïve version of free will when he stays at the fringes of what Priddy considers to be the healthy norm, that gray area in the middle.

In Part 1, I showed that Priddy situated Baba and his followers on a temporal or causal graph that bifurcated away from the center into two extreme horizons or standpoints.

For Priddy, Baba and his followers are to be found at one of the extreme poles, fatalism. On the graph, those lucky to be the brilliant members of the sample take the more refined positions at points of the graph away from the extreme ends (freedom and fatalism).

But Baba's view does not fall between two extreme poles as Priddy wants to believe.

To situate Baba within this 'range,' either at an extreme point or a median point, a range that lies in its entirety within the metrics of sociology and Western psychology, would mean that Baba's philosophy oriented itself from a starting position of matter rather than *atma*.

To read Baba's work as *within* such a graph at all demands that one appropriate his philosophy and implant it within a Western sensibility.

What makes Priddy think that Baba's position can be located within the metrics or narratives of sociology and Western psychology? Further, why does he worry about how Baba's followers interpret Baba's teaching on free will? Why would Priddy, with all his philosophical training,

trash Baba's teaching purely on the basis of the faulty interpretations of followers who, according to Priddy, have no particular philosophical training, followers that fit the profiles of those who will probably never understand free will anyway since they lack the capacity to begin with?

Priddy has placed himself in a knowledge game vis-a-vis Sai Baba and considers his knowledge on the subject to be the superior reading of the state-of-affairs because it represents a more reasonable and *moderate* (and unwittingly, Western) account of freedom.

Priddy's view is that Baba and his followers tend to take an extreme position, thus inevitably lapsing into fatalism. Further, he hints, disparagingly, at a psychological reason for this. "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*" [emphasis added].

Mainly for psychological reasons? Hm.

At first it was unclear to me how being drawn to one pole or another could suggest a *psychological problem* for Priddy, a problem that one would be free of *if only one were capable of a more reasoned, dispassionate view of reality*, a view available to the *very few* who, due to some creative capacity or other circumstance could exceed the historical, social and other limitations life places upon them.

Priddy is not clear about what *non-psychological* or other factor would allow one to be free of the extreme ends of the two poles. For Priddy, the drift toward the poles seems to represent a *drift away from reason*.

In either case, free or not free of the poles, it soon occurred to me that I was approaching this the wrong way. Contrary to my original thought on the matter it now seemed to me that opposite to the way Priddy conceives it, *as one moves away from the extreme poles and closer to the middle gray area, a deterministic picture emerges*.

The closer one is to the mean, the more sedimented *atma* becomes in the surrounding matter.

For now, let us back up and take sociological stock of the situation and forget about that pesky *atma*.

Let us pretend to acknowledge the two pole system that Priddy has proposed and the range of points and positions between them. Having done that, we can proceed as follows.

Let us agree, with Priddy, that the two poles represent the possible range between freedom and fatalism. In that case, it now seems that the segments away from the two extreme poles represent the mean or expected values. More values will generally fall in between the poles than at either end.

We take the mean to represent not the very few rare minds, as Priddy proposes, but the typical individuals, the average result. To the extent that the points of the distribution furthest from the extreme pole constitute the majority of individuals and the average individual or sample, it would seem to me that all Priddy accomplishes with his fancy graph is a description of the least free individuals. These least free individuals will always appear in the average zones, the zone closest to the middle of the graph.

That is, Priddy's most free individual is a normative individual, not the rare individual. Viewed either psychologically, in the case of an individual, or sociologically, when the individual is analyzed as part of the greater distribution, all we attain in the gray areas between the poles is mediocrity.

But, you will say: this contradicts Priddy's intention. This is not what he means to say. What Priddy means is that the rare, more refined thinkers gravitate to the areas away from the poles!

I have latched onto the 'two poles' (which start to seem like torture devices the further we go with this) because Priddy writes about them in more than one place and his thought on the subject is fairly constant.

In *Treatise on Freedom and Fate, Cause and Choice*, a work concerning free will not centered on a discussion of Sai Baba and available on his website, Priddy writes:

Two 'Poles' in the Debate

In essence, the sphere of discussion covering the subject human freedom and causal determinism has two poles. At the one is the idea that our will is 'completely free' in essence, though it may be 'conditioned' by the various different circumstances surrounding each person. At the other pole are the extreme doctrines of total fatalism or unalterable causal determinism. Other relevant standpoints fall somewhere between these 'polar extremes'. It is interesting to note that the fatalistic pole is occupied both by many religious fundamentalists and many natural or physical scientists. The other extreme is hardly populated, except for some philosophers of the existentialist variety, such as Jean-Paul Sartre. The 'tropics and temperate zones' represent the middle way theories, which admit in one way or another of the 'necessity' of there being some free will while recognizing that the conditioners and limitations operating upon us are either more or less powerful. Most thinkers in the social, historical and political sciences are found well away from the poles, as are those who contribute to some form of ordinary common sense, especially in modern and more Westernised cultures.

The *Treatise* is relevant to our discussion because in it Priddy discusses the same two 'poles' mentioned in the text against Sai Baba.

In the *Treatise*, Priddy implicitly admits, although I am not sure that even Priddy realizes it, that his philosophy of freedom, by disavowing either pole at its extreme, and situating the preferred version of freedom at points somewhere in the middle, *defines itself by the extremes it rejects* and by the range of options left: those *allowed* within the gap left by the extremes.

In Part I, I showed how Priddy criticizes 'most people' who represent the extreme points at either ends of the pole. To be fair, I think what Priddy meant to say here was that most people do not

form the clearest conception of the problem of free will. Instead, they assume the more general, less clear view, the one that Priddy happens to place at the points on his graph that represent its extreme poles. Perhaps Priddy was thinking in figural or metaphorical terms and didn't realize the consequences of this decision!

According to Priddy, though he doesn't explain the factors that would bring about such a circumstance, few people will be able to articulate the more refined views of free will, views positioned away from the extreme poles. But, Priddy admits that within the group of those he would classify as the lucky "few," those capable of forming more refined views, religious fundamentalists and scientists *are* to be found, who, in spite of what we might expect, persist in assuming extreme, fatalistic standpoints. A scientist, for example, would have a greater capacity to understand what might be meant by 'free will' than those Priddy groups under "most people."

To be fair, I think that Priddy recognizes a difference between the fatalism he perceives in Sai Baba and the fatalism he perceives in Sai Baba's followers but I am not sure he has thought through the serious ontological problems that arise in his formulation of "The Two Poles of the Debate."

If the difference between free will and fatalism is reducible to positions lying between two poles, that is, a finite range of actions (a range which for Priddy exemplifies the accumulated achievement of Western philosophical thought on the subject) *then no position within the distribution, it seems to me, represents any version of free will* that is not completely determined in advance. The only freedom is then the freedom to choose among predetermined options: multiple choice. Life as a multiple choice quiz. The better you are at picking from predetermined options, the freer you must be.

This hardly resembles Sai Baba's version of free will.

Perhaps I go too far by suggesting that Priddy limits his thinking on free will and fatalism to the range between these two poles. In places his writing on the subject is contradictory.

I repeat a passage from the Priddy essay cited in Part I of my analysis:

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... for example, no one [sic] change everything to taste or override all the laws of nature.

Even if this is not the final statement of Priddy's thought on the matter, it is hard not to see, in the passage just cited, the Ariadne's thread on which Priddy thinks we are all trapped. For Priddy, the range of freedom available to us as human beings seems to confine itself to the thread tensed uneasily between the two poles of freedom and fatalism, a thread that determines and provides the 'circumstances and persons' and is the reason no one can have an 'absolute' free will.

Any true free will would be an ‘absolute’ free will. To truly have an absolute free will one would have to be God. All we can really hope for is willpower: by struggling away from either extreme pole we might master the rules of the charade. There is no other game in town.

So when Priddy suggests we could be gods in the exercise of our creative powers, the gods he has in mind are really small lowercase gods. Priddy has stated, as recently as January 2010 in his blog, that God is a ‘mental construction’ amounting to a social narrative.³

As you recall, Priddy thinks himself to have digested, through half a lifetime of study, what “most known philosophers and scientists have expressed.” He is partly right here to the extent that he belongs to, and resembles somewhat, a line of philosophers and thinkers who have influenced his own beliefs. It is from this ‘line’ of philosophers that, in a causal chain, Priddy takes his logical place on the thread between the poles and derives his so-called authority: although I doubt he would admit it, it is a genealogical line awash with ‘soft’ determinism or fatalism.⁴

It seems to me that a soft determinist thinks of free will in similar way to the way Priddy thinks of it. A soft determinist would want to reduce free will to a *human* scale, and therefore, to a psychology of mental states. Such a determinist views free will from the point of view of material conditions and realities, rather than spiritual conditions and realities.

In other words, the soft determinist is interested in the objective realities, and thus, the physical or psychological limitations that condition our free will. But wait – Priddy’s position in other places, for example an essay called, “Science and Spirit,” would seem to prove I’ve pegged him wrong. In that essay Priddy writes,

rationally problematic forms of Judeo-Christian theology (as distinct from faith) in academic institutions and the Western media greatly hinders appreciation of the exceptional rationality and wholeness of the most highly-articulated Eastern conceptions of mankind, the cosmos and God.

Further:

What consciousness is, from where it arises, what it can or cannot scan according to the level of its evolution or individual development is a question not to be answered profitably by any natural science today or any kind of physicalistic methodology in the future.

Further, Priddy seems to place himself on the list of materialism’s enemies, saying,

The enemies of the humanitarian spirit of science - world-wide economism, commercialism, consumerism and materialism - have been becoming more of an enemy working from within science. The individual

³ <http://robertcpriddy.wordpress.com/2010/01/29/the-circularity-and-inexpressibility-of-advaitic-thinking/>

⁴ Expression coined by William James, American pragmatist philosopher.

*scientist can perhaps best stand up against these pressures through increased awareness of events and self-reflection, which can be effective only up to a point.*⁵ [Emphasis added]

I argue that knowingly or not, statements such as “can be effective only up to a point,” reveal the ever-present specter of the two poles and the impossibility of ever escaping its range of options. Priddy may seem to take contradictory or hybrid positions but wittingly or not, he is indebted to some extent to the materialist view. Where at times he has written sympathetically on the spiritual dimensions of philosophy, more recent publications show a swing away, with an eye to seeing such dimensions as ‘mental constructions.’ Reduction of the spiritual dimension to mere psychological factors within the material framework keeps the rational possibilities from leaning too much toward the extreme poles he wants to avoid.

Since its beginnings, Philosophy has posed itself the problem of the struggle between spirit and matter. More recently, some philosophers think to have ‘solved’ the problem by simply adjudicating the idea of soul or spirit (or any other transcendence of material limits) to be the result of a psychological or mental adjustment that makes life bearable in face of the absurd reality of our finitude and death.

Something in the above description of nihilism resembles, in certain respects, Priddy’s description of the two poles. To imagine, with Baba and his followers, that one could exceed the mortal coil, by claiming some reality or freedom independent of it, is today considered a naïve philosophical position.

In place of such thinking, it is the often stated goal of postmodern philosophies to overcome the top down metaphysical model handed down to us since the Greeks and reveal existence to be synonymous with materiality. In other words, the philosophy that these bodies, this matter, is all we are.⁶

Priddy does not view himself as a determinist but by reducing fatalism and freedom to the common set that contains his two poles, he allows free will and fatalism to be defined by a common rule, the two points collapsed to one dimension of meaning.

When Priddy says, “one might say that we are creators, we are gods,” and compares this view to Sai Baba’s, the distinction should be made that for Priddy, we are creator and gods but only within the confines of what we can be absolutely sure of: a material existence.

⁵ <http://robertpriddy.com/lim/12.html>

⁶ In the Platonic cosmology that the postmoderns presume to have overcome, the chain of reality proceeds from pure spirit at the top to matter at the bottom, beginning with The Good (God) beyond description, below this the pure Forms (Truth and Beauty, etc.), and at the bottom, matter. In this philosophy, the world of matter was nothing but a realm of phantasm and unreality. True reality was grounded in the Forms and the highest reality: the Good. Materialist philosophers reverse this, thinking life organizes itself from below, evolving through chance to higher forms from the chaos of atoms.

While Priddy would object to a wholly mechanistic view of reality, at the same time he maintains a somewhat constricted and contradictory view of freedom where one's ability to discern the more nuanced versions of free will that would enable one to break free of the material situation remains, for the most part, out of reach of 'most people' since they lack the capacity to understand the more refined versions much less act upon them.

Following on this, for Priddy most of us are doomed to remain trapped in the material and psychological circumstances of our lives, a state of affairs that reduces us to a range of positions along a statistical 'distribution' whose middle gray areas would seem to be just as determined, though less hyperbolic and therefore 'more reasonable sounding' in their statements of freedom, as the outer edges Priddy wants to stay clear of.

How do we get away from the cartoon cutout version of freedom? In that version, Priddy paints a picture where you either have absolute freedom in which case you would have to be God or else you accept your limitations and submit to the stark reality of life as a material inheritance.

In Baba's version of freedom, one does not base life on the material picture. We are free from external concerns as a source of our being and focus. Even as we live in the world, we are not of the world.

Because we live in the world, it would appear on the surface that we fall into Priddy's web of situated freedom, a web in which we are freer the more we master the game.

We contend that this is not the case. We may live partway in the material world but our eyes are open and we claim a divine rather than material inheritance. What differs is the source of mastery.

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