Chaos and Meaning:
Kurt Vonnegut on Free Will

by
Richard Halstead

Humanities (English Honors)
Ms. Rinder
April 15, 2005

"Much of Vonnegut's work ... has thumbed its nose at conventional form. But what really matters here, at least philosophically, is free will" (Sayers).

Often in Kurt Vonnegut's novels, characters do not exercise free will. While this inability to affect one's destiny is sometimes a choice, whether the character is aware of it or not, it is often a situation dictated to the character rather than one over which he might have control. However, some of Vonnegut's characters eventually find the means to surmount this limitation on action. These situations allow Vonnegut to explore questions about whether people are able to act freely, as well as allow him to discuss why one would feel such a need. In the end, while the external forces of habit, destiny, and science restrict human free will in Vonnegut's books, he sees hope for the possibility of an internal solution through personal meaning as a loophole in the restrictions.

Why people might not have free will

In the six selected novels, *Player Piano*, *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Galapagos*, and *Timequake*, Vonnegut explores the theme of free will. The reader discovers that some characters can more easily affect their futures than others. Outside forces influence a character's control over his life.

In *Player Piano* and *Timequake*, the role of free will is explored through an individual's ability to make decisions. In *Player Piano*, all employment is controlled through the government and thus Vonnegut questions whether the people in that world are really free. In *Timequake*, the reader watches as individuals are allowed to make their own decisions again for the first time in ten years. Mayhem ensues as people have forgotten how to or even why they need to make decisions.

In *Cat's Cradle* and *Galapagos*, the narrative provides an incontrovertible sense of destiny: the characters have little or no control over the grand sweep of history. In C*at's Cradle*, the narrator suggests that everything people do has been predestined by God to happen according to His divine will. As a result, the characters show little regard for personal responsibility. *Galapagos* questions free will by presenting evolutionary regression as an inevitable destiny if humans don't destroy themselves first. In the end, the survival of the human race is ensured only by the characters' personal illusion of free will.

Finally, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, scientific understanding of the universe is the universal obstacle to free will. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, due to the scientific laws governing time travel, past, present, and future have already happened. No matter the order in which events are experienced, an individual can never have any control over his actions. In *Breakfast of Champions*, the theme of predictability is continued through biochemical reactions. All actions are governed by a series of chemical reactions which could be duplicated in a lab, and therefore do not provide an individual with any freedom of choice.

Old habits die hard

One way in which the characters in Vonnegut's books are prevented from exercising their free will is through habit or conditioning. The characters have spent so long unaware of their capability to affect their futures that they cannot summon the willpower to make deliberate actions. They have a habit, as it could be called, of surrendering their actions to outside control.

In *Player Piano*, many characters have surrendered their lives to society's idea of what is acceptable and proper. As the narrator muses for Paul Proteus, "It was an appalling thought, to be so well integrated into the machinery of society and history as to be able to move in only one plane, and along only one line" (Vonnegut 35-6). Throughout the book, Paul tries to find fulfillment, primarily by escaping the system that has him captive through his career. A like-minded colleague of Paul's said of the world,

> "Do?" said Harrison. "*Do?* That's just it, my boy. All of the doors have been closed. There's nothing left to do but to find a womb suitable for an adult and crawl into it. One without machines would suit me particularly."
>
> "What have you got against machines?" said Buck.
>
> "They're slaves."
>
> "Well, what the heck," said Buck. "I mean, they aren't people. They don't suffer. They don't mind working."
>
> "No, but they compete with people."
>
> "That's a pretty good thing, isn't it–considering what a sloppy job most people do of anything?"
>
> "Anybody who competes with a slave becomes a slave," said Harrison thickly, and he left. (280-1)

The conversation suggests that the state of society forces people to continuously prove that their job cannot be done better by a machine. Life is no longer worth living because an individual is nothing more than a slave, who has no free will. In effect, a person's control over his life has been ceded by the individual to society at large and to its

ideas of what is right and proper much as a player piano follows a prerecorded scroll.

On the other hand, people in *Timequake* have simply gotten out of the habit of acting freely, since they have been reliving history with no way to change it as a result of a disturbance called a timequake. As Vonnegut explains in the prologue of the book, " The premise of *Timequake One* [the first version of the novel] was that a timequake, a sudden glitch in the space-time continuum made everybody and everything do exactly what they'd done for a past decade, for good or for ill, a second time" (Vonnegut xiv). Thus, at the beginning of the book, when the timequake ends, people do not remember what they were doing, because they have been only watching their bodies act for the past ten years. Since the characters had no control over their bodies during the timequake, when it ended, they were unable to manage their bodies' actions. In the book, this is given the name: "Post-Timequake Apathy, or PTA" (113). By simply going where life takes them, those people have completely relinquished their ability to act freely. In a way, this is worse than the situation in *Player Piano* because, in that case, people were locked in by society, whereas in this case people are locked in by their minds. Habits of life can and do prevent Vonnegut's characters from exercising free will.

Embrace your destiny

Another way in which characters in Vonnegut's books cannot exercise free will is a result of the restrictions imposed by unchangeable destinies. Characters' fate is often predetermined and thus their actions cannot effect change.

Cat's Cradle goes on a completely different tack from the previous two novels. With its divine predestination, one is simply incapable of acting freely because whatever

one is doing is contributing toward the fulfillment of God's will. The narrator once comments, “As it happened - 'as it was supposed to happen,' Bokonon would say...” (Vonnegut 235). This very philosophy removes the idea that anything that happens can possibly be other than the result of a divine hand reaching in to manipulate His mortal playthings.

On the other hand, there is a very different type of destiny in *Galapagos*, where it is not so much the will of some supreme being, but rather an eventual and unavoidable fate. “*Galapagos* brings Vonnegut's lifelong belief in the imperfectibility of man to its logical conclusion,” observes a London *Times* reviewer (“Kurt Vonnegut”). Because man is imperfect, he will continue to evolve, no matter what people do. This makes evolution an incontrovertible destiny, which means people have no control over their eventual future and thus no free will.

Science: it's not just a good idea, it's the law

Vonnegut presents a final way of not having free will through science, which conclusively and completely removes the possibility that people can act freely. *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s alien Tralfamadorians have a decidedly linear view of time. That is, time is set out on a line. People like us humans travel along that line but do not actually change anything because one is merely experiencing what has already been established will happen. Thus, anything that will happen has happened because it has always happened that way. The Tralfamadorians explain how the universe is destroyed when one of their test pilots pushes a button, “He always pressed it and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way”

(Vonnegut 101). By saying that "the moment is structured that way," the idea is presented that everything already happened. Otherwise, there would be no existing structure to the moment.

Billy Pilgrim takes this view particularly to heart because it absolves him from the need to act. The narration in *Slaughterhouse-Five* informs us at one point, "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (Vonnegut 52). It is implied that Billy was never capable of effecting change, even before he was informed of the Tralfamadorian view of history. While this philosophy provides him with a stoical outlook that allows him to go on with life, it equally reinforces his own inability to act. As a result of this explanation, Billy is even less able to affect his future (McGinnis).

The other way in which science can prove people have no free will is through chemistry and biology. The idea goes that, since chemical reactions are generally predictable, and animals, as humans are, are run at some level by chemical reactions, by extrapolation people's actions are completely predictable. The Tralfamadorians, of course, take this completely to heart. As the narrator informs us, "Tralfamadorians, of course, say that every creature and plant in the universe is a machine" (Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five* 133). Vonnegut takes this to a logical extreme in *Breakfast of Champions* where he occasionally delights in describing how people are acting, right down to which hormones are being secreted to cause which other hormones to be secreted, in order to cause a specific action to occur (Vonnegut 288).

In the end, however, these two ideas are two sides of a general argument whose basic idea is that what happens has already been determined by some process which, if

one makes the appropriate observations, could allow us to predict the future with perfect or near-perfect accuracy. Even if the future cannot be predicted through a lack of equipment and or an inability to effectively measure the relevant quantities, it still suggests that people do not really have free will but are merely clockwork machines that whir and whir through life, doing exactly what they were programmed to do, even if they don't know what it is.

Why people would want free will

There are several reasons presented in Vonnegut's books which reveal an individual's need for free will. The most important reasons seem to be the innate desire to act freely and the desire to know that one is making a difference in one's own life. Many of Vonnegut's characters are not necessarily able to act on their desires because of impediments produced by the outside world. However, some characters find a way nonetheless. As one critic notes of Vonnegut's novel *The Sirens of Titan*, "The novel's cri-de-coeur – 'Live!' – expresses our most primal human need and implies that the universe is set against our fulfilling such a need" (Giannone). However, the second part of that statement can be applied to many more of Vonnegut's novels. Another of his novels, in fact, even states that same urge in the same cry of "Live!" (Vonnegut *Player Piano* 165). People, Vonnegut suggests through the actions and fates of his characters, can and should overcome the impediments to acting freely.

Making a difference

People desire free will because they want their actions to make a difference.

Without free will, decisions and actions do not matter because there was no choice whether to make them or not – they were bound to happen anyway. Vonnegut presents this as the major reason one needs free will in *Timequake*. When Kilgore Trout realizes it is his job to snap people out of the lack-of-free-will-induced trance they are in which they are stuck, he discovers that it is a lot more effective to appeal to one's desire to make a difference than to one's innate desire for free will. The line he eventually uses is, "You were sick, but now you're well, and there's work to do" (Vonnegut 193).

The importance of making a difference also appears in *Player Piano*. Paul finally finds a certain fulfillment when he discovers something he feels is important to do. The turning point is when he declares himself as the head of the Ghost Shirt Society, taking the blame as well as credit for the work others had done in his name. "The instant he said it, he knew it was true, and he knew what his father had known–what was to belong and believe" (Vonnegut 310). By believing that he is a part of something greater than himself, Paul finally feels that he is making a difference.

Doing what one wants

Another important reason people want free will is so that they have the power to do whatever they want. Before he finds what he feels is his true calling in life through the Ghost Shirt Society, Paul Proteus in *Player Piano* envies his friend Finnerty for daring to do whatever he wants, whether it be a parody of the system or leaving the system altogether as well as being capable of performing his profession (Vonnegut 35). In quitting his assigned job as a double agent rather than turning traitor on his friends, Paul finally makes his move to rebel against society and finds at least some of the satisfaction

that he was seeking.

A similar idea appears in *Breakfast of Champions*. After declaring in *Slaughterhouse-Five* that free will could not exist because science **could** predict all actions if it knew the relevant data, in *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut says of a piece of fictitious modern art through the voice of its creator,

> "It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal–the 'I am' to which all messages are sent. It is all that is alive in any of us–in a mouse, in a deer, in a cocktail waitress. It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us. A sacred picture of Saint Anthony alone is one vertical unwavering band of light. If a cockroach were near him, or a cocktail waitress, the picture would show two such bands of light. Our awareness is all that is sacred in any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery." (221)

This concept of awareness and consciousness is Vonnegut's solution. This idea is his saving grace which allows people to have a freedom of action despite the seeming predictability of things in a scientific world; while most of us may be mechanical, there is an assertive part in everyone that allows us to go on because this consciousness is not a biological appendage. It is an unwavering band of light.

Why does Vonnegut feel such a need for free will?

One of Vonnegut's books, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, assumes there is no free will and

thus life is meaningless, a concept which worries him. One of the characters in the book, Billy Pilgrim, embraces the Tralfamadorian world view of linear time. Vonnegut says of him, "Among things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (Vonnegut 52). However, since Vonnegut wants to be able to make a difference, this is not acceptable for him, even if it is for Billy.

One critic suggests that it is a view that is acceptable for simple people and then goes on to say of Vonnegut's next book, *Breakfast of Champions*,

> Vonnegut's next novel, *Breakfast of Champions*, is about an unsimple soul named Kurt Vonnegut who does contemplate suicide as a viable option. It is about a man who seriously entertains the Tralfamadorian view of man as a machine, who has "come to the conclusion that there was nothing sacred about myself or about any human being, that we were all machines, doomed to collide and collide." It is a novel about a man who is "rescued" from this philosophical cul-de-sac by the assertion of one of his characters that most of man's parts may be "dead machinery" but there is still "an unwavering band of light" in man, his human *awareness*, which must be seen as sacred. (Merrill 64)

This suggests that people who have a goal of more than simply being alive must find a response to the idea suggested by the Tralfamadorians that being alive does not mean that one can actually make his own decisions and control either his life or destiny.

In the end, those people must find some way to take control of their lives, even if it is simply to end that life. Another critic writes, "Vonnegut recently revealed to an interviewer that this new novel [*Breakfast of Champions*] 'isn't a threat to commit suicide, incidentally. It's my promise that I'm beyond that now...' His new novel is really an attempt to find a good reason for not committing suicide" (Schatt 108). His solution to avoid suicide is to find meaning in his life.

Thus, *Breakfast of Champions* is Vonnegut's voyage of discovery to find that meaning. The way he does this is to recognize that the world is chaotic and meaningless. Once that has been identified, people can change to accommodate the real world as opposed to some false one in which life is ordered and makes sense. He never says it is easy; in fact, he says quite the opposite. However, he makes it clear that it can be done. Writing in *Breakfast of Champions*, he says, "It is hard to adapt to chaos, but it can be done. I am living proof of that: It can be done" (210).

As established in the first part of this paper, Vonnegut finds numerous ways to deny the existence of free will. He suggests in some of his books that people have been conditioned to not have free will. In others, he presents an immutable wall of destiny that limits people's range of action. Finally, sometimes he presents scientific reasons which explain why everything has already been set in motion, and even if the parties to the action cannot discern what the end result will be, it is no less fixed because of that lack of understanding.

Sometimes Vonnegut even seems quite convinced of these arguments. Not all the books present a solution to the problem of a lack of free will by their conclusions. Yet,

eventually a solution to each problem is found, although it sometimes resembles a loophole. Conditioning can be broken with effort. Actions can even have meaning within the constraints of destiny if the character desires to make a difference. Finally, the scientific limitations can be surmounted by declaring that man has a consciousness that is separate from his body and is all that is truly sacred about himself (Vonnegut *Breakfast of Champions* 221).

Why does Kurt Vonnegut feel such an overwhelming need for man to have free will? The answer is that he finds the alternative too depressing, even for him, (an individual who frequently contemplated suicide) because he feels that unless one has control over his actions, one's life is essentially meaningless. For Vonnegut, meaningless life is not worth living, so for a life that seems to be both uncontrollable and meaningless, one must find a personal meaning in order to bring about at least a semblance of self-control.

Because of Vonnegut's discomfort with a meaning less life, he gives his characters potential loopholes out of their fates. As one critic observes "Men and women, [Vonnegut] has learned ... are the only creatures in nature whose lives seemed bedeviled by having to find a purpose for things, a meaning for existence that in natural terms would rather follow its own rhythms of being" (Klinkowitz 15). Despite his depressive outlook on life, Vonnegut displays enough hopefulness that he not only recognizes humans' need for meaning, but he also provides the opportunity for his characters to find it.

In the end, while characters in Vonnegut's books are initially restricted from

exercising free will, Vonnegut finds ways for them to overcome the limitations of their world by looking within themselves, instead of waiting for a solution to be presented. The driving forces for the characters are the desire for life to be meaningful and the desire to know that one is in control of one's fate. These prevailing themes highlight Vonnegut's own quest for meaning in his life and promise a similar possibility for everyone.

Works Cited

Giannone, Richard. Vonnegut; A preface to His Novels. Kennicat, 1977. Gale Literary Databases. 5 Oct. 2004. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/GLD>

"Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." Contemporary Authors Online. Gale. 2, Feb. 2002. Biography Resource Center. Infotrac. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>

Klinkowitz, Jerome. "The Private Person as Public Figure." Modern Critical Interpretations: Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea, 2001. 7-16.

McGinnis, Wayne D. "The arbitrary Cycle of Slaughterhouse-Five: A Relation of Form to theme." Critique: Strudies in Modern fiction, Vol XVII, no. 1, 1975. 55-67. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Gale Group. 21 Mar. 2005. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>

Merrill, Robert and Peter A. Scholl. "Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five: The Requirements of Chaos." Modern Critical Interpretations: Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea, 2001. 55-66.

Reed, Peter J. "The later Vonnegut." Vonnegut in America: An Introduction to the Life and Work of Kurt Vonnegut. Ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler. Delacorte, 1977. pp. 150-84. Contemporary Literary Criticism. 22 Dec. 2004. PEN: CLC024DOC0834. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>

Sayers, Valerie. "Vonnegut Stew." The New York Times 28 Sep. 1997. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Gale Group. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/>

Schatt, Stanley. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Indianapolis: Bobbs-merrill Educational Publishing, 1976.

Vonnegut, Kurt. Breakfast of Champions. New York: Dell, 1973.

- - -. Cat's Cradle. New York: Dell, 1963.

- - -. Galápagos: A Novel. New York: Delacorte, 1985.

- - -. Player Piano. New York: Dell, 1952.

- - -. Slaughterhouse-Five. New York: Dell, 1969.

- - -. Timequake. Berkley Books: New York, 1997.