

The King and the Cat: Ellison and Schrödinger on Contingency and Reality

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Ralph Ellison's short story, "King of the Bingo Game," is frequently anthologized and often taught in college classrooms as a fine example of African-American fiction. Issues such as self-definition, self-determination, and cultural criticism are obvious entry points into the text. While all of these serve the instructor well, I believe that the idea of indeterminacy, such an integral part of quantum mechanics, is also an interesting and viable entry point into the text. It articulates many of the intellectual concerns within the story, and illustrates a foundational concept in contemporary physics as well.

I begin my discussion of this text with The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of Bingo at the wheel, pressing the button. The class and I do an inventory of his activity so far, and determine just what this man owns at this time. He is displaced. He has a sick wife who needs medicine. He has his hunger. He has this chance to make things right, at least for a time. And here, when he is holding the buzzer, when the wheel has him in its grasp, before anything is determined, all things are possible and all things are true. He is no longer a lonely man far from home. He is no longer hungry, or lost, or out of work. While he holds this buzzer, he has a name, he has a chance. He is the envy of the audience, the bane of the white handler, and the hero of his own story. But he is also a man alone, hungry, sick, drunk, with a dying wife. He has no papers, no employment, and no prospects. He is a displaced southerner who believed the myth of the North, and is suffering for his foolishness. He is, at the same time, all that he wants and needs to be, and none of it. It is this point of tension, this definition of the self as a collection of opposites, that allows us to speak about Schrödinger's cat.

Erwin Schrödinger was one of the early conceptualizers of quantum mechanics. His work with matter at the subatomic level fundamentally redirected the classical physics model. As was Einstein, he was fond of putting theoretical considerations into striking thought experiments. Schrödinger's cat paradox, first published in 1935, is his most famous thought experiment:

A cat is penned up in a steel chamber, along with the following diabolical device (which must be secured against direct interference by the cat): in a Geiger counter there is a tiny bit of radioactive substance, so small that perhaps in the course of one hour one of the atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none; if it happens, the counter tube discharges and through a relay releases a hammer which shatters a small flask of hydrocyanic acid. If one has left this entire system to itself for an hour, one would say that the cat still lives if meanwhile no atom has decayed. The first atomic decay would have poisoned it. The Psi function for the entire system would express this by having in it the living and the dead cat (pardon the expression) mixed or smeared out in equal parts. (152)

Schrödinger here illustrates the fact of superposition, the recognition that an object can occupy two quantum states at the same time. In quantum physics, when we do not know what the state of any object is, it is actually in all possible states simultaneously, as long as we don't check on it. It is the measurement itself that causes the object to be limited to a single possibility. Before we check on the cat, it is in a superposition of the states of life and death, both alive and dead at the same time. Only when we open the chamber does it revert to one state, either death or life. Our cat in the steel chamber, then, is also a collection of opposites, defined as in an

indeterminate position, and therefore occupying all positions until we, with our observation, confine it to only one.

This state of indeterminacy, where we cannot properly measure what state the object at hand is in, is the crucial analogy for the text under consideration. It is only when The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo releases the button that he becomes the loser in this game. While he holds on to the button, anything is possible. Laura is both alive and dead. He is both drunk and sober. He is lost and at home. He sees that the machine is god, and feels god-like in his power, his potency. He has a name, and he is nameless.

It is difficult for students raised on the classical physics model to understand the intricacies, or even the basic premises, of quantum physics. I am sure that I do not understand the field, but my willingness to admit my ignorance of the subject usually leads to interesting discussions. While using this approach, I have had many students shake their heads in wonder, while others deny the validity of such a claim. If they look to me for an explanation, I proclaim that I do not understand the concept completely, but recognize the similarities between the poor cat and our poor protagonist. His release of the plunger is our release of the door lock in the steel chamber.

The final irony of the story, of course, is the fact that, in winning, he loses. He wins the jackpot, but loses consciousness, and probably loses the jackpot, his liberty, and his wife as well. This juxtaposition of states, this reverse kenosis, is the last bit of quantum indeterminacy. One state is much like the other; they are, at times, indistinguishable. We cannot speak of such death-in-life for our cat, but it certainly applies for our protagonist.

But it is not merely this tidy analogy that makes Schrödinger so applicable to Ellison. Rather, it is the fact that we can use this indeterminacy to present the central issues of the text that I mentioned earlier: self-definition, self-determination, and cultural criticism. It is only when our protagonist holds down the plunger that he is able to name himself. The narrator refers to him only through the pronoun “he.” At the beginning of the story he is called “buddy” by the old man who passes him the bottle. As he walks to the stage, a voice in the audience calls him a “fool,” while another merely calls him “man.” Once on the stage, the man with the microphone calls him “boy.” As the wheel begins spinning for a longer and longer time, calls from the audience label him as a “jerk” and “Ole Jack.” Finally, caught in the throes of the wheel, he realizes something momentous:

Then someone was laughing inside him, and he realized that somehow he had forgotten his own name. It was a sad, lost feeling to lose your name, and a crazy thing to do. That name had been given him by the white man who had owned his grandfather a long lost time ago down South. But maybe those wise guys [the members of the audience] knew his name.

“Who am I?” he screamed. (132-33)

Of course, the audience does not know his name, either. In fact, he concludes, they do not even know their own names. But he recognizes that, “as long as he pressed the button, he was The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo” (133). He has finally cast off the remnant of the racist past that is his name, and has named himself, given himself power through this self-definition. And, as with all good names, this name sums up the character.

It is only through the movement to this state of indeterminacy that The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo is able to name and therefore define

himself. In the midst of a nameless crowd, he is singled out and given a unique opportunity. His defining moment, then, is the instant he grasps the button and realizes that it possesses power beyond him. He discovers, while watching the whirling wheel, "This is God. This is the really truly God!" (130). He says this with such conviction that he is afraid that he will lose his balance (both physical and mental), but the audience does not hear him. He tries to let the audience in on this secret, but they will not listen. He sees the force behind the indeterminate quantum state as the Prime Mover of the universe. We may argue whether this recognition of the force behind all things, and the recognition of his place in the universal schema, gives him the strength to create such a defining space, but no matter which side we come down on, the point remains that he acknowledges a power greater than himself, and in doing so lays the groundwork for his own creation.

Self-determination is an essential topic when discussing African- American fiction. From Frederick Douglass to John Edgar Wideman to Toni Morrison, it is a preoccupation for writers. Ellison, of course, is no exception to this rule. Our Man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo is finally able to take control over his life, once he moves into this state of radical indeterminacy. Now that he knows who he is, he is able to move forward and determine how he wants his life to be. Of course, the \$36.90 will help a great deal, as it will buy much-needed medicine for his wife and perhaps get him some food for his stomach.

But again, it is in the pressing of the button, in the indeterminate moment, that our protagonist becomes most himself, and maps out his future. Those in the audience do not understand not only that the indeterminate moment is the ruler of the universe, but also the ramifications of such a realization. If indeterminacy is truly god, then existence truly precedes essence, and Ellison has given us an original existential hero, one who can recreate himself in an instant. While critics such as Fabre and Ramarajan have recognized Ellison's philosophical leanings in *Invisible Man*, there is a relative dearth of scholarship that sees such a stance in this story.¹ Indeed, in this world where indeterminacy rules, anyone is free to fashion and refashion themselves at any time. The idea of a static self is gone, replaced by the malleability of the existential self.

Finally, there is the issue of cultural criticism. Ellison's work is underpinned by an inherent critique of the dominant culture of his day. This story is no exception. On the racial level, perhaps the easiest to point out in the text, there is the recognition that the white man, and the white police, take away the King's mechanism for self-definition and self-determination. Our King, though ridiculed by the audience, serves as a representative for them, pinning their hopes on a game of chance, ruled by the dominant culture. Black men are not allowed to create their own future; it is handed to them by white men. Their only option is to play along or absent themselves from the game. As our King is dragged off to jail, bereft of his prize, his self, and even his consciousness, we see where both abstaining and winning lead for those who do not control the game.

On a deeper level, though, there is something that Ellison wants to say about the culture of materialism in American society. We are forewarned of this in the story when our King notes that,

If this was down South, he thought, all I'd have to do is lean over and say "Lady, gimme a few of those peanuts, please ma'am," and she'd pass me the bag and never think nothing of it. Or he could ask the fellows for a drink in the same way. Folks down south stuck together that way; they didn't even have to know you.

But up here it was different. Ask somebody for something, and they'd think you were crazy. (123-24)

Here Ellison, besides noting the cultural differences between the North and the South and echoing Douglass' pain at recognizing the hollowness of the myth of the North, remarks on the lack of generosity of the audience. This is what urbanization has done; it has destroyed, in some sense, the selfless African-American culture that preceded it, or that exists as an alternative to it in the rural South. It is because these members of the audience do not know who they are, or do not recognize the untenable positions they have been forced into, that they are unable to move outside themselves in order to help someone else. One's basic needs must be met before one can care for another's needs. It is obvious, in the hard-heartedness of the audience, that their needs are not met by their surroundings, and therefore they are unable to move beyond themselves to help a stranger. Their own indeterminacy paralyzes them, makes them focus inward, looking for their own self-definition, and ultimately never finding it, for they do not control either the game or the wheel.

The students' reactions to the facts of quantum physics serve as the final connection between Schrödinger and Ellison. The paradigm shift that quantum physics represented (and still represents, to a great degree), and the very fact that many students do not accept this bedrock scientific assertion as the truth, creates a nice discussion point concerning the changing of cultures. I ask students to reflect on their scientific education, and if they were ever introduced to quantum physics or mechanics during their scholastic careers. Most of them have heard of the topic, but do not understand anything about the field. It is easy, then, to understand their reticence to accept something so seemingly fantastic as the truth. I then ask students to gauge their own problems with quantum physics, an issue in which they have very little intellectual capital invested, and then assess the cultural problems surrounding the issues of race and class, where there is a great deal of cultural capital invested. This little exercise makes it easy for students to see the complications which would arise if someone were to take up Ellison's mantle as a critic of the predominant culture.

Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game" is a significant work, one which requires of its readers a great deal of thought, and an ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time. Erwin Schrödinger's thought experiment asks the same thing of us. Both Ellison and Schrödinger succeed in demonstrating the paradoxes of their respective fields. These paradoxes open up both the text and the experiment for us, complementing one another around the issues of self-definition, self-determination, and cultural criticism.

Note

1. Fabre spends more time with Wright than Ellison, while Ramajaran focuses almost exclusively on ethnicity and alienation.

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