

FREE WILL

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Hume has characterized the problem of freedom and determinism as "the most contentious question of metaphysics, the most contentious science".¹ These words, written more than two hundred years ago, as aptly describe the philosophical disputation revolving around the problem now as it did in his own day. He went on to say, ". . . this dispute has been so much canvassed on all hands, and has led philosophers into such a labyrinth of obscure sophistry, that it is no wonder, if a sensible reader indulge his ease so far as to turn a deaf ear to the proposal of such a question, from which he can expect neither instruction or entertainment. But the state of the argument here proposed may, perhaps, serve to renew his attention; as it has more novelty, promises at least some decision of the controversy, and will not much disturb his ease by any intricate or obscure reasoning".² It is hardly necessary to remark that the promise of a decision Hume thought lay in his argument has no more materialized than it has from other arguments in which philosophers have placed their confidence. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the conspicuous feature of the philosophical debate since Hume has been repetition of arguments, accompanied by changes in nomenclature. This state of affairs raises the question as to what it is in the nature of the problem which permits an endless seesaw of arguments. Like Pandora's box the problem has re-

¹ *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding* (2nd ed., Selby-Bigge, Editor), Pt. 1, sec. VIII, par. 73.

² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

leased intellectual irritants, and along with them Hope, which spurs philosophers untiringly to seek its solution.

A curious feature attaching to the problem throws it into an unnatural light and makes the dissimilarity between it and a scientific problem greater and more puzzling. This is that some philosophers report, and others deny, that they have introspective awareness of their own freedom. Henry Sidgwick, who rejects the notion that his volition is wholly determined by his character and motives, has written: “. . . no amount of experience of the sway of motives even tends to make me distrust my intuitive consciousness that in resolving after deliberation I exercise free choice as to which of the motives acting on me shall prevail”.³ Sidgwick’s “intuitive consciousness” of his freedom stands firm, according to his report, in the face of all counter-arguments. The fact that the problem remains unsolved suggests that perhaps the consciousness of free choice is not vouchsafed to all. This is mystifying. Without expanding on the point, it may be said that an outsider to the dispute might well be perplexed as to what to think, whether Sidgwick labored under a delusion about himself or whether others suffer from a special inner blindness. The philosophical case is remarkably different from the case in which a scientist claimed to see in his instrument what no other scientists who looked into it saw.

A point made by R.E. Hobart increases the mystification: “That we are free in willing is, broadly speaking, a fact of experience. That broad fact is more assured than any philosophical analysis.”⁴ According to this, everyone, regardless of the philosophical position he takes, experiences, or has intuitive consciousness of, his exercise of free choice. If this is the case, what are we to think of a philosopher who takes his stand with a piece of analysis that goes against the “more assured” fact? Moore’s paradox comes to mind, that philosophers have been able to hold sincerely views inconsistent with

³ *Methods of Ethics*, p. 51.

⁴ “Free-will as Involving Determinism and Inconceivable Without It”, *Mind*, 1934, p. 1.

what they knew to be true. In the present instance, philosophers by implication are represented as rejecting, on the basis of an analysis, a proposition which experience unmistakably shows to be true.

In an ordinary instance of a piece of reasoning going against known fact, however impeccable the reasoning may seem to be, we do not give up what we know. Known fact is impervious to argumentation that goes against it. It is a puzzle why a philosopher who takes it to be a fact of experience that we are free in willing is not disconcerted that some people could be made, by a mere argument, to deny that they have free choice. It appears that what would be considered abnormal in an ordinary circumstance is accepted as quite normal in philosophy. Nor does it come as a surprise to learn that the claim that we have inner knowledge of our free will is opposed by a counterclaim. Some philosophers have maintained that the "intuitive consciousness" of freedom is an illusion which is induced by a *feeling* of exercising free choice. Still other philosophers have stated that there is no such feeling. Leibniz, for example, has said: "The reason which M. Des Cartes has alleged, for proving the independence of our free actions by a pretended lively internal feeling has no force. We cannot properly feel our independence, and we do not always perceive the often imperceptible causes upon which our resolution depends."⁵

The claim and counterclaim regarding the perception of free will would seem to be intrinsically irreconcilable, which is to say that no further fact would bring the debate to an end. This suggests that the question, "Is there such a thing as free will?", may not have been properly understood. The possibility that this is the situation is strengthened by the suspicion Hume voices, that the philosophical controversy is in some way verbal, that it "has hitherto turned merely upon words."⁶ G.E. Moore has said that philosophers too often try

⁵ *Die Philosophischen Schriften von G.W. Leibniz* (Gerhart, 1875-90), VI, p. 130.

⁶ *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding*, Pt. I, sec. VIII, par. 63.

to answer questions before getting clear on what precisely the questions are that they wish to answer. In the case of the question about free will it would seem of primary importance to get clear on the *nature* of the question and on *the kind of information* it requests —factual, verbal, or *a priori*. The possibility that it is *not* a scientific question, *i.e.*, that it is not a question to which any sort of observation or experiment if relevant, cannot be dismissed and must be included in the investigation of its nature.

There can be no doubt that the problem regarding freedom of the will is taken by philosophers to be a factual one. The question whether man is a free agent seems to be on a footing with the question whether a certain person is in prison or is a free man. And those who investigate the problem give the impression of seeking to discover a fact about humankind. When one philosopher claims that he has direct awareness of his own freedom and another thinks him to be deluded and that all he is aware of is a lively feeling of being a free agent, the impression created is that a matter of fact disclosure to introspection is in debate. But when still a third philosopher declares that no such feeling exists, that “we cannot feel our independence”, then although the disagreement continues to appear to be about matter of fact, bewilderment increases.

Investigation of the nature of the problem can most conveniently be made through a brief survey of certain perennial arguments which have collected around it. When a person is said to have acted of his own free will the implication is that he could have avoided acting as he did. However, it has been maintained that if all occurrences fall under causal laws, then whatever happens was causally predetermined to happen and what does not happen was causally predetermined not to happen. It would follow, thus, that anything that a person does he was predetermined to do by a series of causes antedating his action and even his own existence. The familiar consequence which some philosophers draw is that in a causally determined world no action that occurs, nor the decision to bring it about, could have been different.

This is not to deny the *logical* possibility that what happens

should have failed to happen and that what does not happen should have happened. The tide was not stopped by Canute's command, but it is logically possible that it should have been. However, the fact that an action done could, in principle, not have been done and that an alternative act might have occurred instead, does not show that the action done was voluntary. That an alternative is *conceivable* does not show that the agent could *in fact* have avoided doing or choosing to do as he did. What is logically possible may not be psychologically or physically possible. The fact that, for example, a certain reflex action might, conceivably, not have occurred does not imply that it was under the agent's control and could have been prevented by him. Only if, in the situation in which a person acted in a certain way, the person himself could have prevented his action would it count as freely willed or voluntary.

It is sometimes held that for an action to be voluntary it must be uncaused. With respect to uncaused actions some philosophers have taken the position that since all occurrences are caused, including human actions and choices, nothing is ever the outcome of a free choice. Other philosophers have denied that every occurrence must have a cause. Thus A.J. Ayer has written that the determinist's "belief that all human actions are subservient to causal laws still remains to be justified. If, indeed, it is necessary that every event should have a cause, then the rule must apply to human behaviour as much as to anything else. But why should it be supposed that every event must have a cause? The contrary is not unthinkable".⁷

Asserting that it is conceivable and therefore not logically impossible for something to happen without a cause only has point if determinism rests on the tenet that all occurrences must, by logical necessity, have causes. But a determinist need not subscribe to this stringent tenet. Even Spinoza implied the conceivability of an uncaused action when he claimed that in a case in which we are unaware of the cause

⁷ *Philosophical Essays*, p. 272.

of an occurrence we *think it is uncaused*. What needs to be settled is not whether an uncaused act is logically possible, but whether an uncaused voluntary act is logically possible.

One familiar objection to the view that voluntary actions are uncaused is that an uncaused occurrence is one which just happens, *i.e.*, is a spontaneous occurrence, for which no one can be held responsible. Just as a person cannot be held responsible for behavior which he is causally predestined to act out, so he cannot be held responsible for an action which just happens. The implication is that our not being accountable for action *x* entails that we could not have avoided action *x*, which entails that *x* was not willed by us. According to this objection, no action can occur on its own and also be a voluntary act of an agent.

Against this some philosophers have held that freedom is not incompatible with causal determination and that in a world in which every occurrence falls under a causal law there still would be room for free choice. These philosophers insist that freedom is opposed to certain kinds of causes but not to all causes whatever. Whether an act is free or not depends upon the nature of the cause. Spinoza has written, “. . . if we understand by a man compelled, one who acts against his will, I admit that we are in certain things in no wise compelled, and in this respect have free choice.”⁸ And it has been held by current writers that only special kinds of causes, such as constraint and compulsion, prevent an action from being free. Ayer has written: “. . . it is not, I think, causality that freedom is to be contrasted with, but constraint. And while it is true that being constrained to do an action entails being caused to do it, I shall try to show that the converse does not hold. I shall try to show that from the fact that my action is causally determined it does not necessarily follow that I am constrained to do it: and this is equivalent to saying that it does not necessarily follow that I am not free.”⁹

These words represent the disagreement between philoso-

⁸ Correspondence, letter 58 (Van Vloten's edition).

⁹ *Philosophical Essays*, p. 278.

phers as centering on the question whether an entailment holds: Does having a cause entail not being freely willed? This would seem to be an *a priori* question, one which can be settled without leaving concepts, to use Kant's words. How there could be intractable disagreement over whether there is or is not an entailment between two concepts so familiar is a puzzle. Leaving this question aside, it is to be noted that the main point of Ayer's statement, *viz.*, that freedom is opposed to constraint rather than to causality, needs to be supplemented by a special argument showing that an action can be free despite its being causally determined to happen, and is not merely free in so far as such special causes as constraint and compulsion are absent. A philosopher who holds that freedom is incompatible with causality is well aware of such facts as that not all causes are compulsions or constraints, and holds his view nevertheless. To point out to him a distinction he is aware of can hardly be expected to make him see his "mistake". He can grant to the indeterminist that a person who succumbs to a psychological compulsion such as pyromania or one who is pulled out of a group of protestors and pushed into a police wagon, is properly described as one who "has no alternative" or "is prevented from behaving differently". It is not in dispute that such behavior is not free.

Where the determinist disagrees with the indeterminist is over the question whether an alternative is *ever* open to the agent, whether any act could conceivably be causally determined and at the same time freely willed. The indeterminist would hold that even when an agent is coerced by a threat he is not deprived of the alternative of not capitulating to the threat; he remains free so long as, in Caesar's words (in Shakespeare's play) "the cause lies in his will". The determinist replies that the act of choosing is determined. Any cause, not merely the special causes of compulsion and constraint, precludes freedom.

The assertion that being causally determined prevents a piece of behavior from being freely chosen would seem to advance an entailment claim. Furthermore, the assertion that

being uncaused prevents an action from being freely chosen would also seem to put forward an entailment claim rather than to state a contingent connection. Taken together the two apparent entailment claims have the consequence that freely willed actions cannot occur. Their conjunction, being caused entails not being free and not being caused entails not being free, covers all the possibilities. From either conjunct it follows that no action is freely willed. A philosopher who argues in this way implies that there are no describable acts which could count as voluntary. His argument has the form,

$$\begin{array}{l} p \text{ entails } q \cdot \sim p \text{ entails } q \\ p \vee \sim p \\ \hline \therefore \sim \diamond \sim q. \end{array}$$

The conclusion that freely willed acts do not exist thus appears to be *a priori*, despite its empirical air.

As is known, philosophers have divided over the import of sentences expressing *a priori* propositions, some maintaining that they have factual content, others denying it, some maintaining that their import is verbal, others denying it. Although it is of first importance for the correct understanding of philosophical utterances to have a clear view of the nature of *a priori* statements, this matter will not be gone into here. For the purposes of the present problem it is sufficient to note that the fact that a sentence denotes an *a priori* proposition comes down to a fact about the use of terminology entering into the sentence. *E.g.*, the fact that "Blue is a color" denotes a necessary proposition is equivalent to the fact that the word "color", in point of usage, applies to whatever the word "blue" applies to. Alternatively, although the words "blue" and "color" have a use in the language, the phrase "blue but not a color" does not. Hence anyone who thinks that the sentence "Freely willed action is impossible" expresses a necessary proposition is committed to thinking that the sentence "Freely willed action' has no use in the language" expresses a true proposition about usage —just as anyone who thinks

that the sentence "It is impossible for a sphere to have edges" expresses a necessary proposition is committed to thinking that the phrase "sphere with edges" has no use to describe a shape. Similarly, a person who actually had the idea that it is logically impossible for an action to be voluntary would not use the word "voluntary" to refer to an action nor would he understand a request like "Will you volunteer to do so-and-so?" It is, to be sure, just a fantasy to suppose that anyone who knows everyday English would fail to understand a question of the form "Will you volunteer to do so-and-so?" Regardless of the arguments leading to the *philosophical* denial of free will, it is unrealistic to imagine anyone's giving up free will terminology. Those who deny free will alike with those who assert it use the language with equal knowledge of actual usage.

Some philosophers have realized that the denial of free will goes against common usage. They correctly point out that "freely willed" and "voluntary" do have a use in the English language to describe actions, whether actual or only imagined. They can cite the current distinction between acts that are voluntary and those that are compelled, and the frequent attempts in courts of law to establish whether the accused's action is voluntary. If the dispute between determinist and indeterminist were over what the facts of usage are, then the dispute should have long since been terminated, and in favor of the indeterminist.

Granted that the words "voluntary", "constrained", "involuntary" have a use, the question arises whether there are actions to which they apply. The term "dinosaur" has a use, though its denotation has contracted to zero. Are "freely willed" and "voluntary" in the same case? Anthony Flew argues that from the fact that these terms can be explained by reference to paradigm cases it follows that there are cases to which they apply. He writes: ". . . if there is any word the meaning of which can be taught by reference to paradigm cases, . . . [e.g.], to such paradigm cases as that in which a man, under no social pressure, marries the girl he wants to marry. . . it cannot be right. . . to say that no one *ever* acts of his own

free will. . . For cases such as the paradigm, which must occur if the word is ever to be thus explained (and which certainly do in fact occur), are not specimens which might have been wrongly identified: to the extent that the meaning of the expression is given in terms of them, they are, by definition, what 'acting of one's own free will' is."¹⁰

There are two possible constructions to be placed on Flew's argument: one is that because "freely willed action" can be taught by citing actions to which it applies it follows that freely actions occur, the other, from Bertrand Russell, that "because we may say [when a man marries without external compulsion] 'he did it of his own free will' there is, therefore, a linguistically correct use of the words 'free will' and therefore there is free will."¹¹ The first interpretation involves a *petitio*: what is supposedly *inferred* from the fact that "freely willed action" could be taught by exhibiting cases to which it correctly applies, is that freely willed acts do occur. But here the verbal premise to the effect that the term's meaning is given by pointing out cases of its correct application covertly contains what is to be shown: that there are actual cases to which it applies.

Russell's interpretation avoids this objection by construing the conclusion that freely willed acts exist as following from the verbal fact that "freely willed" has a linguistically correct use. That is, the existence of freely willed acts is inferred from a *verbal* fact. But examination of what is linguistically correct can never take us beyond language to occurrences in the world. Given that it is true that "freely willed" (like "dinosaur") has a descriptive use, this implies only the *possibility* of there being instances to which it applies. Ontological information is not to be obtained from an examination of usage alone.

Neither can one suppose, as seemingly Hume did, that perhaps a verbal misunderstanding is at the root of the dispute between determinist and indeterminist. He has written:

¹⁰ *Essays in Conceptual Analysis*, p. 19.

¹¹ Foreword to Ernest Gellner's *Words and Things*, p. xiii.

From this circumstance alone, that a controversy has been long kept on foot, and remains still undecided, we may presume that there is some ambiguity in the expression, and that the disputants affix different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy. . . nothing, one would think, could preserve the dispute so long undecided but some ambiguous expressions, which keep the antagonists still at a distance, and hinder them from grappling with each other.¹²

Hume's explanation has its appeal, for who has not at some time or other engaged in a dispute only to discover later that he has been arguing at cross purposes, without there being any difference of opinion? Nevertheless his explanation does not dispel the mists. Sooner or later a verbal misunderstanding is cleared up; but this is not in store for the philosophical dispute.

Philosophical controversy is not usually carried on as though any *linguistic* fact were at issue. For the most part rival philosophers appear to argue as though what is in contest is a nonverbal matter of fact. Wittgenstein characterizes this kind of thing as a confusion that pervades philosophy, "the confusion that considers a philosophical problem as though such a problem concerned a fact of the world instead of a matter of expression."¹³ The fact that the issue apparently concerns the *concepts caused* and *freely willed*, *i.e.*, that the determinist and indeterminist are at loggerheads over whether any caused act could conceivably be freely willed, shows that the appearance of being a factual dispute is delusive.

There seems to be only one way to make understandable the irresolvability of the debate. This is to suppose that the "contradiction" in the notion of a freely willed caused action is not a contradiction. If it were a contradiction, then the words "freely willed caused action" would have no more use

¹² *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding*, Pt. I, sec. VIII, par. 62-3.

¹³ *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932-1935* (from the notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret Macdonald), p. 69.

to refer to an action than “sphere with edges” have to refer to a figure. This fact suggests that a contrived *ersatz* contradiction is brought into existence by changing in some way contradiction-free terminology. Since no point of actual usage is in debate, it may well be that a linguistic innovation is being surreptitiously introduced, with neither contestant being aware of what is happening: one introduces a piece of altered usage which the other does not accept. Wittgenstein has remarked, after raising the question, “How is ‘will’ actually used?”, that “in philosophy one is unaware of having invented a quite new usage of the word. It is interesting that one constructs certain uses of words specially for philosophy.”¹⁴

Although the determinist knows that the concepts denoted by “voluntary” and “either involuntary or compelled” are taken to entail antithetical consequences, what is invisible both to him and to his opponent are two linguistic concomitants involved in his re-edited terminology: first, “voluntary” is retained in his philosophical vocabulary as though it served a function it usually does in any empirical statement. His claim that voluntary acts do not exist is presented as parallel in import to “Dinosaurs do not exist”. Secondly, since he holds that there are no *possible* alternatives to any act the agent does, so-called voluntary acts would be classified with all other acts of the agent, namely, as being unpreventable. The term “voluntary” would no longer have its usual function to distinguish voluntary acts from those which are either involuntary or compelled.

With this loss of function by the term “voluntary”, the terms “involuntary” and “constrained” would not serve to describe a class of acts distinct from those we now classify as voluntary. As Wittgenstein has said of such philosophical terms, “they are used in a typically metaphysical way —without their antitheses.”¹⁵ In consequence all alike lose their descriptive function, although “voluntary” is artificially retained

¹⁴ *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. I, p. 12.

¹⁵ *The Blue Book*, p. 46.

in the philosopher's language, as though it functioned as it usually does to refer to acts of an agent which he could avoid doing —not to mention the fact that the determinist in his ordinary talk continues to use “voluntary” and “involuntary” in the usual way, as entailing antithetical consequences.

The linguistic innovation of changing “voluntary action which could have been prevented” from a redundancy to a contradiction introduces an idle innovation. The determinist does not intend any practical alteration of a current distinction, as witnessed by the two facts that he presents his view as if he were stating an empirical truth, and that he continues to speak, in Berkeley's words, with the vulgar. The tenacity with which he holds his view leads one to suppose that the linguistic innovation associated with it is psychologically important to him. As Wittgenstein said, “we may be irresistibly attracted or repelled by a notation.”¹⁶ One can only speculate about what the attraction is. It may, at the unconscious level of the determinist's mind, represent the need to avoid inner censure for an unacceptable wish.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

RESUMEN

Hume afirma que el problema de la libertad y su relación con el determinismo "es la cuestión metafísica más discutible". Desde Hume se han venido repitiendo los mismos argumentos con meros cambios de nomenclatura. Lo que más conviene para investigar la naturaleza del problema del libre albedrío es examinar, brevemente, ciertos argumentos que han perdurado alrededor de él. Es la naturaleza del problema lo que debe preocupar al análisis filosófico: conviene, en el espíritu de Hume y Moore, intentar aclarar previamente qué sentido tiene la pregunta ¿hay algo como el libre albedrío? En la discusión suelen darse concepciones diferentes sobre la "libertad de la voluntad" tales como: a) "libre albedrío" como cierta experiencia o conciencia interna de ser un agente que elige. No obstante, "libremente" podría significar tan sólo b) una ilusión provocada por la experiencia de actuar a menudo sin considerar los factores causales posibles (un sentido menor en esta línea es cuando alguien tiene la sensación de libertad por el hecho de "no estar preso o cautivo"); c) más aún, puede negarse que haya tal experiencia o conciencia interna argumentando que creer tener tal experiencia es una mera ilusión. Además, la cuestión se complica con el problema de la causalidad y lo que ésta significa. "Libre" suele entenderse como lo que no cae bajo leyes causales, aunque no es claro por qué tendría que ser así necesariamente. El argumento en contra de la libertad basado en la causalidad versaría: Si toda acción cae bajo leyes causales, por tanto no hay acciones libres. Por otra parte, otro argumento en contra de la libertad del agente diría: Aun cuando algo que fue de hecho podría lógicamente no haber sido el caso, esto no basta para afirmar que fácticamente hubo tal alternativa, por una parte, y que el agente de la acción podía elegirla, por la otra. En la dificultad determinismo *vs* indeterminismo cabe preguntar: ¿hay una alternativa abierta para el agente? ¿Es posible que un acto sea causalmente determinado y al mismo tiempo sea elegido libremente? La libertad, es cierto, se opone a cierto tipo de causas, pero no irrestrictamente: por ejemplo, no se opone cuando la causa no es necesaria para el acto libre.

Sidgwick argumenta en favor de a), y en esa misma línea se encuentra R.É. Hobart; en cambio Leibniz, al oponerse a Descartes —seguidor también de a)—, va en la línea de b). Ayer es escéptico ante la creencia de que toda acción esté determinada causalmente. Hay también los análisis en términos de proposiciones, donde se considera que el problema es meramente verbal: se examinan las relaciones entre el uso de los términos y sus casos de aplicación. Sin embargo, en este terreno parece que el

problema suele desembocar en el uso del término "voluntad" en cierto sentido especial o nuevo, lo cual dificulta la discusión y vuelve ininteligible el problema mismo. En esta línea de discusión se encuentran los trabajos de B. Russell, Wittgenstein, A. Flew y otros. El problema es más claro si se piensa en que "voluntario" e "involuntario" implican consecuencias opuestas, pero que puede concebirse de modo tal que no se opongan. Esta distinción mostraría el uso en el que realmente se oponen los términos y los usos en los que no hay oposición, y permitiría descubrir el peso del argumento determinista.

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