

INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

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PART III THE POWERS OF THE INTELLECT

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:
APPETITIVE POWER AND ITS ACTS:
WILLING AND CHOOSING

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The human intellect has two generally distinct powers, as distinct as desiring is from knowing, as seeking is from understanding, and as judging and reasoning are from deciding and choosing.

The preceding chapter dealt with the intellect's cognitive power as distinct from the cognitive power of other animals, which resides in their sensitive organs; and as cooperative with the cognitive power of sense-perception, memory, and imagination. Here we shall deal with the intellect's appetitive power, which is traditionally called "the will."

The word "will" and many other words derived from it or associated with it are to be found in everyone's everyday speech. We speak of being willing or unwilling to do this or that. We confess to having a weak will or take pride in our strength of will. We talk about one person's willpower being greater than another's. We describe one action as voluntary and another as involuntary.

I suspect that few of the persons whose speech is peppered with these words realize that the will is an intellectual power or that the will is the intellect functioning appetitively rather than cognitively. Nor do they probably realize that the intellect in its appetitive dimension cooperates with sensual desires and emotional drives or urges, just as the intellect in its cognitive dimension cooperates with sense perception, memory, and imagination.

The mentality of other animals also has two distinct powers: cognitive and appetitive. But lacking intellects, they do not have wills. Just as their cognitive powers do not rise above sense-perception and perceptual thought, so their appetitive powers do not rise above the level of sensual desire and the urges or drives of bodily passions or emotions. These sensitive powers, both in their cognitive and appetitive dimensions, are common to human beings and other animals.

Being animals, albeit intellectual animals, we, too, have sensual desires and emotional urges. These may come into conflict with reason and will, even overpowering them and causing us to act in a nonvoluntary fashion. Lacking intellects and, therefore, lacking wills, other animals always act in a nonvoluntary fashion, and by doing so, they do not exercise freedom of choice, as men do when they act voluntarily.

As the immateriality of the intellect in its cognitive dimension makes conceptual thought possible, so the immateriality of the intellect in its appetitive dimension makes the freedom of the will possible. If the will were embodied in a physical organ, such as the brain, physical causality would govern its actions.

The acts of the will are not uncaused acts, but the kind of causality that governs acts of the will, not being physical, permits them to be both caused and free. In the age-old controversy about free will versus determinism, it has seldom, if ever, been understood by those who take the determinist side of the issue that there is no conflict whatsoever between causal determinism in the realm of material things (bodies in motion), and free causation in the realm of the immaterial (acts of the will).

A central thesis of this book, as readers are fully aware, is that the brain is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of conceptual thought. We cannot think without our brains, but we do not think with them. This statement about the relation of the brain to the intellect's cognitive powers applies similarly to the relation of the brain to the intellect's appetitive power.

We cannot will our bodily movements without brain action, but freely willing to perform this or that bodily action is not an act of the brain. In the exercise of the intellect's appetitive power, as well as in the exercise of its cognitive power, the brain is only a necessary, but never a sufficient, condition.

In the nonvoluntary behavior of the higher animals, the brain and nervous system are not the only physical organs in which sensual desires and emotional urges are embodied. They are embodied in visceral organs as well.

Consider the difference between the behavior of a hungry cat meowing to be fed and that of a drowsy cat aroused by the sight of its food being placed on the floor. In the first instance, the cat's behavior is driven by hunger pangs in its viscera. In the second instance, the cat's behavior is driven by the visual perception of an object that arouses sensual desire on its part.

In the second instance, the desire that causes the cat to act is itself caused by a cognitive act—a sense-perception that involves the cat's eyes, central nervous system, and brain. In the case of the hungry cat, the hunger pang that arises in the cat's viscera innervates the cat's brain to meow for food.

Thirst and sexual urges operate in the same way as hunger. But while hunger, thirst, and sexual urges are present in both human beings and nonhuman animals, they do not operate in the same way.

In nonhuman animals, the behavior thus caused is always nonvoluntary. In human beings, with certain exceptions presently to be noted, the behavior that normally occurs as a result of such visceral urges is voluntary conduct in which the will is involved. For even when the impulse to act in a certain way is aroused by visceral urges, the action may or may not occur, depending on a free choice of the will to concur or not concur with the urge in question.

As we have seen, the nonvoluntary behavior of other animals is motivated in two ways: either by visceral urges of which the animal becomes sensitively aware, or by the sense-perception of desirable objects.

In sharp contrast, human voluntary behavior is motivated in only one way: always by a cognition of the object to be desired, whether that cognition is an act of perception and imagination in which the intellect cooperates or is purely an act of the intellect.

Seeing or imagining delectable food may cause a sensual desire for it that will be enacted if the will concurs in it. It will not be enacted if the will inhibits that sensual desire. But human voluntary conduct may occur without being precipitated by sense-perception or imagination.

Consider the human desires we call the love of pleasure or power, the love of money or fame, the love of liberty, of country, of God. All of these are intelligible, not sensible, objects. That is obviously true of power, fame, country, liberty, God; but it is also true of pleasure and money when these are not particular instances of pleasure or money, but pleasure and money in general.

I shall presently comment on the misuse of the word “love” to name these appetitive tendencies, most of which are acquisitive desires. The exceptions are patriotism, or love of country, love of one’s friends, and love of God. In all these uses of the word “love,” whether or not it is misused for acquisitive desire, the impulse to behave in a certain way is caused by an act of will, an appetitive act that is cognitively motivated. The object of desire is intellectually apprehended by an act of understanding, not sensitively apprehended by perception or imagination.

Though cognitively motivated by acts of intellectual apprehension, and also by acts of practical reasoning that may be involved in deliberation and decision about what action should be taken, the will’s choice is not determined thereby. If emotion or passion does not overpower will and, in effect, put it out of operation so that the ensuing behavior is nonvoluntary, the will always remains free. No matter what prescriptive judgment issues from the practical intellect, the will always remains free to decide which course of conduct to command. No matter what choice is made by the will, if the behavior is voluntary, the will is always able to choose otherwise.

A person whom we love is a good example of an object of desire that, while it is an object apprehended by sense perception, may be desired either sensually or intellectually. If the person is desired solely as a sexual object, then the desire is sensual, and both its arousal and satisfaction involve a variety of consciously felt bodily reactions and impulses. If the person is loved solely as a friend, then that love is purely an act of the will without any consciously felt bodily reaction; and that act of will takes the form of a benevolent impulse to confer all sorts of benefits upon the person loved.

One and the same person may be loved in both ways—as a sexually attractive person who arouses bodily impulses in us and as a friend toward whom our will is benevolently disposed. The love for that person is then erotic love, in which the sense and the intellect cooperate, quite different from mere sexual desire, which is lust and not love at all.

Love may be purely intellectual, having an object that is apprehended conceptually, and being the object of a benevolent impulse that is an appetitive act of will and not of sensual desire. Patriotism, the love of one's country, is one example; the love of God or of one's neighbor as one's self is another example of love that is intellectual in its appetitive aspect as well as in its cognitive aspect. It is an act of will that is not accompanied by any bodily feelings or reactions.

Acts of the will as acts of the intellect's appetitive power presuppose acts on the part of the intellect's cognitive power— acts of the practical intellect that are prescriptive judgments about what ought to be sought as ends and what ought to be chosen as means. After such judgments are made by the practical intellect, it still remains for the will to carry those judgments into execution by acts of intention with respect to ends and acts of choice with respect to means.

Since in the field of will's desirable objects, all objects desired are understood as either ends or means, the only acts of the will are the two just mentioned - intention and choice. Both are preceded by prescriptive judgments on the part of the practical intellect, but in neither case do the prescriptive judgments necessitate the act of the will in the way that, in cogent and valid reasoning, the premises necessitate the conclusion.

In this fact lies the freedom of the will: free in its intention of the end and free in its choice of means.

The will would be necessitated with respect to an intelligible object if the speculative intellect ever presented it with the apprehension of a complete and perfect good. That never happens on earth. Hence, both with respect to ends and means, the will is always free to intend and choose otherwise. Whatever the will elects as an end, it might have elected something else. Whatever the will chooses as a means, it might have chosen otherwise. In that one word, "otherwise" lies the essence of the will's freedom.

As I have already pointed out, when strong visceral urges completely dominate our behavior and the will is temporarily in abeyance, our conduct is nonvoluntary. Such abnormal behavior on our part is exactly like the normal behavior of other animals. When that occurs, persons usually say that they would not have behaved in that way if they had not temporarily lost their minds; by which they mean that they would not have acted in that way had bodily

urges or passions not temporarily been in complete control of their conduct.*

*Drug or alcohol addiction also produces in human beings such abnormal behavior. All addictive behavior is nonvoluntary.

Even when we act voluntarily and the will is engaged in such action, the will may be more or less free. These degrees of freedom vary with the degree to which, on the one hand, rational judgments on the part of the practical intellect solicit the will's choice or, on the other hand, the degree to which sensual desires and bodily urges do.

In either case, the will remains free in its choice and the ensuing action remains voluntary. But when rational judgment prevails, the will's natural freedom of choice is augmented by its freedom from the passions. When the solicitation of sensual desires or emotions prevails, the will's natural freedom of choice is diminished by its subjection to the passions.

This loss of freedom is usually ascribed to what has traditionally been called a conflict between reason and the passions. The conflict might be more accurately described as between the prescriptive judgments of the practical intellect and the appetitive impulses of strong sensual desires or violent bodily emotions. The factors in conflict contend with one another in exerting influence upon acts of the will. If the becomes dominant in this conflict, the will remains free, but reason does not control our behavior. If the prescriptive judgments of the practical intellect become dominant, the will remains free and reason controls our behavior.*

* The titles of the last two books of Spinoza's *Ethics* illustrate the point just made. The title of Book IV is "Of the Passions, or of Human Bondage." The title of Book V is "Of the Reason, or of Human Freedom." What is called "moral liberty" by other philosophers and by theologians in the Western tradition consists in our ability to will as we ought in accordance with the moral law and the prescriptions of reason. Described negatively, moral liberty is freedom from the influence of the passions—sensual desires and bodily emotions.

Sensual desires and bodily emotions are not always in conflict with rules of reason—prescriptive judgments of the practical intellect. They sometimes reinforce those judgments and generate impulses that tend in the same direction as the will's free acts.

Within the sphere of the intellect's appetitive power, habits are formed by repeated voluntary acts in one direction or another. When such habits result from voluntary acts in which reason controls the passions (i.e., the prescriptions of the practical intellect

dominate), the habits are called “virtues.” When, on the other hand, such habits are formed by voluntary acts in which the behavior has been dominated by uncontrolled sensual impulses, the habits are called “vices.”

Sensual desires for food, drink, and other bodily pleasures aim at objects that are really good. Human beings need them, but not in unlimited quantities. Such desires become inordinate and lead to immoderate sensual indulgence when reason puts no limit upon them; and habits of immoderate sensual indulgence become the vices of gluttony, insobriety, and lust.

Of the three cardinal moral virtues, only justice is purely a habit of the will. The other two—courage or fortitude with respect to pains of all sorts and temperance with respect to pleasures of all sorts—are habits of the passions or sensual desires as well as of the will. They are habits of the will insofar as the will acts freely in accord with the prescriptions of the practical intellect. They are at the same time habits of the passions or sensual desires insofar as their impulses have been moderated by reason, and they are thus prevented from being habits of inordinate sensual indulgence.

I have repeatedly referred to bodily emotions and sensual desires. I have used the word “bodily” to signify that, properly understood, emotion is a passion that the body suffers and we consciously experience when a complex set of bodily reactions occurs: changes in respiration and pulse, changes in epidermal electricity, increases of blood sugar and adrenaline in the blood due to reaction on the part of the glands of internal secretion, pupillary dilation or contraction. In short, an emotion is a widespread, violent bodily commotion that is consciously experienced and accompanied by strong impulses to act in a certain way.

When emotion is thus defined and understood, there would appear to be only two violent bodily emotions that we experience: anger and fear.* The sexual passion that occurs when sexual desires are consummated may be a third, but it is seldom as violent or as widespread a bodily commotion as anger or fear.

*Rage may be a better name for the violent emotion of anger, and “righteous indignation” a better name for anger when it is an act of the will without bodily involvement.

Readers may ask, “What, then, about all the words in everyday speech that appear to be the names for a much larger number of emotions or affective states than the two or three just mentioned?”

Literature as well as everyday speech is full of such terms as joy, sorrow, grief, compassion, sympathy, delight, depression, elation, and so on. Most of these terms signify affects that are states of the will, of which we are consciously aware, but there is little or no felt bodily commotion in our consciousness of them.


Grief and depression are, perhaps, exceptions to what I have just said. A grief-stricken person is often convulsed with tears, sobs, and sighs or cries. A depressed person experiences loss of muscle tone, postural changes, and altered facial features. But for the most part, the list of words that are thought to be the names of emotions, sentiments, or affects (it could be much longer than the enumeration above) name literary inventions or fictions of the imagination. They are not names for experienced bodily feelings. They may be states or tendencies of the will that we experience consciously, but they are not accompanied by bodily feelings of any sort.

Most of us frequently misuse the word “hate,” as if it were a strong bodily emotion, when we should instead use the word “dislike” to signify a state or tendency of the will. We use the word “hate” when we dislike someone intensely enough to wish to avoid any contact with that person. Such intense dislike, being an act of the will, is not accompanied by any bodily feelings. However, if the intensity of the dislike erupts into violent anger or rage, then a bodily emotion is felt and impulses to bodily action occur that may cause injury or death to the person emotionally hated.

The word “love” is similarly misused, often when no felt bodily emotion or sensual desire is experienced. In such cases, it would be better to use the word “like” when the intellectual judgment is simply one of approval. And as I pointed out earlier, we often misuse the word “love” when our appetitive tendency, sensual or intellectual, is one of acquisitive desire, not benevolent impulse. That is lust, not love; and it may lead to the violent bodily commotion known as orgasm.

In the chapters to follow, we will be concerned with the misuse and neglect of the intellect, as well as with the kind of habits that put the intellect to good use. Habits of using the intellect properly are the intellectual virtues. The contrary habits, formed by repeated misuse of it, are the intellectual vices. A very special vice, to which I have given the name “sloth,” results from the nonuse of the intellect— from the habitual neglect of it.

The discussion in this chapter of the moral virtues, especially courage and temperance, prepares us for the consideration of the intel-

lectual virtues. Without the fortitude needed for taking pains and surmounting difficulties, and without the temperance needed for restraining sensual indulgence and moderating the desire for sensual pleasure, it is unlikely that one would have the strength of character required to acquire the intellectual virtues. 

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