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GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

Mortimer J. Adler

PART V

Questions About Theology and Metaphysics

57. FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM

Dear Dr. Adler,

I am perplexed by the problem of whether we have “free will,” the power to choose and decide our own actions. I accept the explanation of the world offered by the natural sciences, according to which the course of things is determined by a pattern of causes. I don’t see how I can reject a similar explanation of human affairs by the social sciences, and especially psychology, which disproves the notion of free will. Yet I balk at accepting the idea that we have no control over our own lives. I would like to know what the major thinkers, past and present, have to say about the question of free will and determinism.

D.J.W.

Dear D. J. W.,

Those who deny free will usually do so because they explain all natural phenomena in terms of a chain of causes. They hold that since man is a part of nature, he cannot be exempt from this universal chain of causes. Those who uphold free will usually distinguish between human actions and all other natural events. They maintain that a man’s actions flow from his own initiative and choice. But some free-willers believe that the initiative claimed for human action is characteristic of everything else in nature. They believe that our basic model for interpreting the world as a chain of causes is all wrong.

Let us be clear what is meant by “freedom of the will.” It means freedom of *decision*, not freedom of *action*. It is freedom to choose a certain course of action, a certain goal, or a certain way of life. Being able to do what we choose to do depends on external circumstances. Despite “what every woman knows,” not every woman who wants to get married succeeds. Thus it is possible to believe in freedom of the will while holding that a man’s freedom to act may be limited by adverse circumstances.

In past ages, philosophers such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant uphold free will, while Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, and J. S.

Mill oppose it. In our own day, Jean Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher, is perhaps the most extreme protagonist of man's power to determine for himself what he will become. Sartre says man is absolutely free of all conditions, including the influence of his own past. We are only what we choose to be. We have to be free in order to *be* at all. Human existence is freedom. The unfree is the inhuman. Says Sartre:

Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible. . . . Man does not exist *first* in order to be free *subsequently*; there is no difference between the *being* of man and his *being-free*.

Other modern thinkers, such as A. N. Whitehead, Henri Bergson, Paul Weiss, and Charles Hartshorne, agree with Sartre in affirming freedom of choice. However, they differ from him in ascribing some influence to an individual's past and in extending freedom of choice to the nonhuman world.

When you mentioned psychology as "disproving" free will, you were probably thinking of Sigmund Freud. He is one of the most pronounced opponents of free will in our time. For Freud, all of a man's desires are determined, on the one hand, by natural impulses and needs, and, on the other, by cultural pressures to which he unconsciously conforms. Psychoanalysis offers a way to achieve individual freedom, through an arduous process of self-knowledge and self-mastery. But freedom of the will as a natural endowment is for Freud a complete fiction. Freud says:

The psychoanalyst is distinguished by an especially strong belief in the determination of the psychic life. For him there is in the expression of the psyche . . . nothing arbitrary, nothing lawless. . . . Anyone . . . breaking away from the determination of natural phenomena at any single point has thrown over the whole scientific outlook of the world.

Contemporary positivistic philosophers, such as Moritz Schlick and A. J. Ayer, believe that freedom consists in our being able to carry out our desires in action. They think we are free when circumstances are such that we could have done otherwise than we did, had we chosen to do otherwise. But they claim that we could not have chosen to do otherwise unless our whole past and all other influences on us were different.

In taking up a position on this subject, we face an interesting dilemma: Are our views of free will themselves determined, or are they a matter of free choice? In either case we are out of the realm

of scientific demonstration. And, by the way, nobody can yet claim that psychology has *disproved* free will. William James, himself a believer in free will as well as a scientific psychologist, maintains that the stand we take on this question is itself an act of free will. We must decide freely even when we espouse determinism. All our subsequent “proofs” depend on this previous act of the will.

James tells a delightful story about a man who found himself in a quandary. He saw two buildings on opposite sides of the street, one with the sign “Determinists’ Club,” the other with the sign “League for Free Will.” He first went into the Determinists’ Club, but when asked why he wanted to join it, he replied, “Because I choose to,” and he was thrown out. He then tried to join the League for Free Will, and when asked a similar question, he replied, “Because I have no other choice,” and again he was turned away.

The paradoxical and circular character of this problem caused James many sleepless nights and brought him to the verge of a nervous breakdown. I hope that you will not be similarly disturbed.

58. FATE AND FREEDOM

Dear Dr. Adler,

The notion of fate plays a big role in the writings of the past. Fate seems to be an inevitable destiny that no man can change. How does fate differ from the religious notion of providence or from the scientific notion of determinism? Do all these notions deny the possibility of human freedom?

G. R.

Dear G. R.,

For the ancient Greeks, fate is the inexorable and inevitable course of events. Fate assigns to each man his personal destiny. This notion is personified in the three Fates, which allot to each newborn child its share of weal and woe. Sometimes fate is identified with the will of Zeus, the Father of gods and men. But usually fate is thought of as an impersonal power, resting in the order of things and determining the destinies of both gods and men.

The ancient Greeks have a religious attitude of awe and reverence toward fate, as the expression of a supreme power transcending human will and action. The individual cannot change his fate.

What will be, will be. In Sophocles' tragedy, Oedipus, in a vain attempt to escape his doom, takes the very steps that bring it about. All that the individual can do is to meet his appointed destiny nobly, as Oedipus does, asserting his human dignity and tragic awareness.

The Biblical notion of providence resembles the Greek idea of fate in ascribing human destiny to the will of a superhuman power. However, the Biblical emphasis is on God's personal will and purpose, and the idea of divine providence implies and requires the idea of human freedom. God's will is to be accomplished through man's will and action.

Mysteriously, in a way that men cannot fathom, providence combines divine predestination and human freedom. In the Bible, men may oppose God's will or resist their divinely appointed mission, but in the end God's will prevails and men serve it. God's plan overrides men's plans and makes their wills serve His. But providence is not inexorable like fate. It allows room for human freedom.

In spite of the prophecy of doom by God's reluctant prophet Jonah, the people of Nineveh are saved, because they repent. God's plan is for salvation, not for doom. God's transcendent wisdom and power bring good out of evil, and assent out of denial. The pagan oracles, on the other hand, foretell what is doomed to happen and cannot happen otherwise.

The Latin poet Virgil, in the *Aeneid*, comes close to the Biblical view of providence. Aeneas has a divinely appointed mission to bring the remnant of the Trojan race to Italy and to found what is to become the Roman Empire. He is the human instrument of the gods in accomplishing this great historical purpose. Aeneas is tempted to evade his mission, but he is soon recalled to his destiny by the gods themselves. Divine will compels him, yet he is credited with virtue for his compliance. The end he serves is a golden age of Roman law and peace for the world.

Scientific determinism presents the modern version of fate. According to it, man's lot—individually and socially—is determined by inexorable social and economic laws. It holds that the ultimate result will be a state of perfect equality, freedom, and brotherhood. It calls on men to cooperate with inevitable laws in bringing the predetermined good society into being. Similarly, Freudian psychoanalysis holds that individual thought and action are psychologically determined, but nevertheless thinks that psychoanalytic therapy can transform and free the individual.

59. WHY CALL ANYTHING A SIN?

Dear Dr. Adler,

I know that it is wrong to steal, to lie, to murder. What does it add to my sense of right and wrong to say that these acts are sins? It just seems to give me an unwholesome sense of guilt and dread. Is “sin” an obsolete term in this modern day and age?

C. H.

Dear C. H.,

“Sin” is essentially not a legal or moral term. It is a religious term and refers to man’s offense against God. “Sin” has no meaning apart from the awareness of God’s holiness and majesty. Where this awareness is lacking, there is no sense of sin, no matter what a person may do or fail to do.

The state of sin is essentially man’s separation from God. The act of sin is one of disobedience and rebellion in which man turns away from God. Man opposes God’s will with his own. Elements of perverse will and pride are present as man puts himself and his desires at the center of things, instead of God.

These essential elements of sin are brought out dramatically in the Biblical story of Adam’s sin. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit not only because it looks so good, but because the serpent has promised that eating it will make them equal to God. Perverse pride and desire motivate this original act of disobedience and rebellion against the divine command.

Augustine reveals further the inner motivations behind sin. He tells us in his *Confessions* how he stole pears when he was a boy simply for the joy of stealing. It was not the taste of the pears but the taste of the sin—“the thrill of acting against God’s law”—that delighted him. This is a good example of the perverse desire that underlies the act of sin.

But sin is not only manifested in certain acts that are forbidden by divine command. Sin also appears in attitudes and dispositions and feelings. Lust and hate are sins, as well as adultery and murder. And in the traditional Christian view, despair and chronic boredom—unaccompanied by any vicious act—are serious sins. They

are expressions of man's separation from God, as the ultimate good, meaning, and end of human existence.

Obviously, then, religious wrong—sin—is not the same as legal wrong—crime. The civil law deals only with offenses against men or society. It is concerned only with overt acts, not with inner attitudes or the direction of a person's whole life. Although the content of some sins is the same as that of some crimes (murder, adultery, and theft, for instance), many sins are not crimes at all (idolatry, for instance).

The reason we associate crime and sin is that both religion and law involve precepts of morality. But moral wrong is not exactly the same as sin. Moral knowledge and responsibility are possible apart from religious belief and the sense of sin. From a purely natural viewpoint, when man transgresses the moral law—in murder, theft, etc.—he is doing wrong and he is departing from the natural order of things.

In Judaism and Christianity, however, the breaking of the moral law is also a sin. The transgression of the moral law is also a transgression of the divine law. The offense against man is an offense against God. It is a demonstration of irreverence, apostasy, and disobedience to God. "I have sinned against heaven and before thee," says the prodigal son to his father. This expresses perfectly the attitude of the religious man toward his own wrongdoing.

We may say, then, that all violations of the moral law are sins, but they are so only as expressions of man's turning away from God. Sin comprises more than moral offenses, for despair and boredom are sins apart from any evil deed. And holiness consists in something more than the perfect observance of the moral law. Pascal observes that the more righteous a religious man is the more he considers himself a sinner. He is the one who is most keenly aware of how far away he is from perfect holiness.

A vivid instance of this is presented in the Book of Isaiah, where the prophet feels himself utterly unworthy and unclean in the presence of the divine holiness. This is a deeper meaning of sin than that ascribed to individual acts and attitudes. We may call it the sin of human status, of man's worthlessness when compared with God. The Christian doctrine of original sin—inherited by the human race from Adam—is one of the ways thinkers have tried to account for the sin of human status.

60. THE DILEMMA OF JOB

Dear Dr. Adler,

According to the conventional and optimistic view of things, good men have a pleasant and successful life, while the evil are miserable. But this just isn't so, at least not all the time, and maybe not even most of the time. We all know of good men who suffer all kinds of misery, and of evil men who prosper and enjoy life. How can we avoid being cynical about the way the world treats its good and evil men? And what are we to teach our children about these matters?

C. L. S.

Dear C. L. S.,

What you say is true. Good men often suffer, and evil men often prosper. It just isn't true that the wicked always get their comeuppance and that the good have a glorious time. Hence we are wrong to teach our children this untruth, not only because it is an untruth but also because when they grow up and find out the truth, they may turn into cynics or pleasure-seekers. Besides, as the sages and the saints tell us, it is immoral to advocate being good just for the sake of earthly rewards.

The problem you raise is a real one only for those who believe there is a moral order in the universe. Only to them does the world seem irrational and unjust if the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper. Those who do not believe that there is any such moral order in the world can stoically adjust themselves to what they consider to be the facts of life. They may either try to get away with what they can, or try to preserve some decency and honor in an unpropitious and uncongenial cosmos.

The Book of Job is the great example in our literature of the quandary of a man who believes that a moral order exists even though the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper. Job believes that the world is ruled by a perfectly just God. Yet he, a man of flawless piety and good works, suffers outrageous calamities. He is bewildered by his fate, which seems to make folly of his belief. Nevertheless he stubbornly adheres to his faith in divine justice and in his own innocence. This despite the vexing admonitions of self-righteous friends, who assure him that he must have done wrong to be the victim of so much woe.

At one point Job stands up to God and contends with him. While acknowledging the omnipotence of God, he questions the justice of what has happened to him. But in the end Job accepts his “trial” and the mystery of suffering with an absolute, in-spite-of-everything faith: “Even though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.”

The Book of Job is subject to many interpretations, but in general it has been agreed that it teaches us not to expect earthly rewards for our good deeds and earthly punishments for our wickedness. Natural calamities, such as earthquakes, tidal waves, and forest fires, beset good and bad alike. Some of the most fortunate and prosperous members of the community are corrupt and evil. If in the divine plan there is a just retribution for sin and a just reward for righteousness, it must be meted out in an afterlife, not on earth.

Quite apart from any anticipation of what may be in store for us after death, the Book of Job has a moral to teach. It counsels that when suffering befalls us, we should accept it in faithful trust as a trial sent by God. It warns us not to take our temporary prosperity or good fortune as a sign that we are in the clear. Our virtue is on trial in both cases, even more perhaps when luck is running with us than when we suffer one adversity after another.

The contemporary French religious philosopher Gabriel Marcel has meditated deeply on this notion of “trial.” He concludes that our personalities are “proved” in the terrible moments of contradiction, exile, and suffering which we must meet in our lives on this earth. They are sent, “addressed” to us, and we must respond to them, in faith and trust, with quickened and deepened lives.

This is roughly the message of Job and the Psalms and many other religious writings. It is not an easy one for children to understand—or adults, for that matter. But it is, nevertheless, worth pondering, for it does throw light on one of the great mysteries of man’s earthly existence.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Ben Rutherford

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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