



FREEDOM OF THE WILL

MORTIMER ADLER

Part 1 of 2

It has been said by no lesser person than Immanuel Kant that the freedom of the will, along with the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, is one of the great issues the human mind must address itself to and decide where the truth lies. In the vast literature on freedom, this is the only subject which is even partially disputed. It is not, in my judgment, adequately disputed, but it is more fully debated than any of the other questions about freedom. Yet, I think you will see as the evening goes on that the dispute which I will report to you leaves us in some doubt as to which side has the stronger reasons.

I would like to have you play a little game with yourself as I proceed. I shall keep going back and forth—arguments on one side, arguments on the other—for a long time; and as I do so I would like to have you keep your finger on your intellectual pulse. I would be very curious to know—if you haven't already made up

your mind firmly before this lecture starts—whether you shift or tend to move at all from one side to the other; whether, in the course of the evening as you hear reasons on the one side, you think, “Well, that must be the answer!”, and then find yourself weakening as you hear the reasons on the other. At the very end I will tell you where I stand.

I was and I still am very reluctant to give this lecture: not because it is too difficult in the sense of more difficult than other subjects I have treated, but because unfortunately this is a subject about which I know too much. There is nothing more deadening to the mind than adequate knowledge of any subject. It prevents that free and easy approach to the problem. It prevents a light-handed gaiety in dealing with opinions. I am weighed down in this case by 500 pages of manuscript which we completed last year as a part of the second volume of *The Idea of Freedom*, which deals with this subject.

In preparation for this lecture, I studied these five chapters which were written a year ago. The notes for this evening’s lecture, covering these 500 pages, come to fifty pages. In view of this, you will realize that I am giving you an impressionistic and simplified account of the matter, with many details left out, with unavoidable inaccuracies that always go with brevity. On the other hand, there may be some advantage to this procedure, for the details involve much repetition. It is really amazing how little original is ever said of any subject. In all these 500 pages there are only a few main points repeated over and over again.

Let me tell you how I am going to proceed. I’m going to start by telling you as precisely as I can what the conception of a free will is on the part of those who affirm that man has one, Then I want you to hear what those who deny it think they are denying. Having set the stage by stating the issue as precisely as I can, I am going to report, first, the main dispute about the reality or existence of free will, I say this is the main dispute because the arguments here, pro and con, are arguments that go to the heart of the matter, that really affirm or deny the things presupposed, the fundamental facts of nature which are presupposed by anyone who affirms a free will. Then, having done that, I will go to the subsidiary disputes in which the arguments are extrinsic rather than intrinsic, i.e., they affirm or deny free will in terms of things that are related to it, rather than in terms of what it presupposes. Then I will state two very special attacks; one very special attack on determinism, which I think is not answered by anyone; and another attack on free will which is answered; and finally at the end, I will try to reveal the

crux of the matter.

The freedom of the will is only one among a number of freedoms. The most obvious freedom is the freedom that everybody recognizes as the opposite of being in chains, being coerced, being forced by bodily strength, being in prison. This freedom, which most of us recognize, is entirely in man's possession as a result of fortunate circumstances. Under favorable circumstances, you and I are free to do as we please. We can act as we wish, whatever our purposes or inclinations. If the circumstances in which we are living are favorable, we can execute our intentions, carry them out. This is what most people understand freedom to be: freedom of action under permissive circumstances, which do not impede action or obstruct it.

There is another freedom which is not due to circumstances and which moralists across the centuries have talked about: the freedom of the virtuous or wise man. It is an acquired freedom, not a circumstantial one; a freedom which men acquire with the acquisition of virtue and wisdom, whereby they can will as they ought. According to this theory of freedom, there is a moral law, a moral imperative, an ideal of life to be approximated. Our wills are not as strong or as good or as true as they might be, and there are obstacles within us. Just as there are external obstacles in the world when one man interferes with another man's action, so within us there are forces, passions, aspects of our lower nature, which sometimes prevent us from acting or willing as we ought. This second kind of freedom, then, is possessed by men of virtue or wisdom who have the strength to will as they ought in conformity with the moral law.

The freedom of the will is neither of these and quite unlike both of them. It is not dependent upon circumstances; it is not dependent upon the acquisition of virtue or wisdom. If there is a free will, it is possessed by man under any circumstances and by foolish men as well as wise, by vicious men as well as virtuous. For this freedom, if it exists, is a natural freedom; a freedom inherent in the nature of man. If it exists at all, it is possessed by *all* men. All men have it, and usually those who affirm such freedom also say that *only* men have it. The lower animals, the non-rational animals, do not have freedom of the will. Freedom of the will is somehow coincident with the possession of reason.

And what does such freedom consist in? If circumstantial freedom is the freedom to act as one wishes, and if the acquired freedom that depends upon virtue and wisdom is the freedom to will as one

ought, what is this natural freedom, this freedom inherent in the very nature of man as a rational animal? It is the freedom to decide—not to act, not to will in a certain way, but to make up one’s own decision. Perhaps the easiest way to say this is that it is the forming of one’s own character creatively by deciding for one’s self what one shall do or shall become.

Stated negatively, the point is clearly seen. The freedom to act as one wishes is a freedom from external obstructions and impediments that get in one’s way. The freedom to will as one ought is a freedom from inner impediments—one’s passions or sensuous inclinations. The freedom of the will is a freedom from one’s own past, from one’s already formed character, as well as from surrounding circumstances; so that at this moment, no matter what I have been, nor how my character has been formed, no matter what my past is, my inherited nature, or my acquired nature, I am still free to choose to do this or that.

Now, this is a strange freedom—so strange that I must employ even stranger words, technical terms, in order to keep the repetition of the point brief. In such freedom these things are involved. One is “causal initiative,” one is “causal indeterminacy,” and the third is “intrinsic unpredictability.”

Free will, if it exists, means that the self, or the will (and I think that probably the easiest way is to talk in terms of the will), is a cause of one’s choices without itself being an effect, without itself being caused. The will is an uncaused cause, a cause which acts without being caused to act. It is not an effect of any prior cause. Another way of saying this is that the will is an active power, able to act without being acted upon by any other efficient cause. For the moment let this suffice as a definition of causal initiative.

Causal indeterminacy means that the will as a cause is able to produce one of a number of alternative decisions. Most causes when they operate produce one effect.. Either a single cause or a set of causes, when it operates, produces its one effect, so that if the same cause operates, you can expect the same effect. The fundamental law of causation upon which most of science rests is such that when a given cause, or set of causes, operates, you expect from the operation of that cause, or set of causes, the effect appropriate to it. One cause, one effect; same cause, same effect; a given cause operating, only one effect produced. That is what we mean by “causal necessity”—a necessary connection between cause and effect. So, we ordinarily say, “If the cause operates, then this effect, and only this effect, must occur as a result.” But, according to those who

hold the doctrine of free will, the will is not that kind of a cause. The will is an indeterminate as opposed to a necessary cause, for when it operates it can produce any one of several effects; that is, the same cause can have one of several effects.

The third thing is intrinsic unpredictability. If the will is an uncaused cause and a cause indeterminately able to produce any one of several diverse effects, then it follows from such causal initiative and causal indeterminacy that a man's future choices, if he has free will, are incapable of being foreknown with certitude. Given perfect knowledge of all the causes operative in the making of decisions—a man's character, his history, etc.—it is impossible to know from this perfect and complete knowledge of the causes which choice he will make. One might know it with some probability, but to know it with certainty is, I repeat, impossible. Now, I am not concerned with whether or not we can ever have perfect or complete knowledge of all relevant causes. All that is being said here is that *even if such knowledge were available*, it would still be impossible to predict with certitude what a man's future choices will be if he makes them with free will.

Now, I must simplify. In the long history of this subject, not all of the major writers perfectly agree about these three points. Yet, with only one or two exceptions—glaring exceptions, as a matter of fact—all of the great writers do agree that freedom of the will involves causal indeterminacy and intrinsic unpredictability. All of them conceive free will as an unpredictable act of choice. In the case of causal initiative, a clear majority holds that the will's power to choose freely involves its being an active power—able to act without being acted upon. Hence, a recent author-philosopher in Scotland, C. A. Campbell, says, and I think quite properly, that the freedom of the will should be called a contra-causal because it stands out as an exception to the rule that every cause is itself an effect. It also contradicts the rule that every effect is necessitated by its cause or that every cause is limited to producing one and only one effect.

And so we see what looks like a clear opposition between the "Libertarians" and the "Determinists." Let me use those two words to name the opposite positions. I will use the word "Libertarian" to name those who affirm the freedom of the will and the word "Determinist" for those who deny it.

The Libertarians then affirm and the Determinists deny causal initiative. The Determinists insist that the chain of causes is unbroken. There is no cause that is not the effect of some prior cause.

There is no cause that is not preceded by other causes, which produce it as an effect.

Again the Libertarians affirm what the Determinists deny; namely, the causal indeterminacy of the will. According to the Determinists, all causes have the character of necessary causes. Should they fail to have this character, it is a deficiency on their part rather than a kind of causal indeterminacy.

And finally, the Determinists hold that there is no intrinsic unpredictability in nature. We do not in fact have perfect and adequate knowledge of causes, but if we were to have such knowledge, all future effects could be predicted with certitude.

Hence, it would appear that we have an issue here. To start, I shall state the main attack on free will. Then I will present the Libertarian answer to it. Finally, I will go to the subsidiary disputes.

The Determinists say that the principle of causation is universal and without exception. Human behavior forms no exception to the general rule of the reign of causes in the world of nature. This means that every cause is itself an effect of prior causes and is determined by those prior causes; that every effect which happens in nature is necessitated by its causes; that given the same cause, the same effect must follow; and, hence, that every effect is intrinsically predictable with certitude.

There is a special application to human behavior of this general argument about causes. It is said by the Determinists that a man's decisions are determined by his character—both his inherited nature and the way that inherited nature is overlaid and modified by all the accretion of habits that constitute the developed character of man and by the motives that spring from his character in the particular case. Here we have a man faced with a particularly tough decision to make. He comes to that decision with a whole past, with a formed character, with motives, desires, inclinations that spring from that character in the face of the circumstances. What decision he will make flows right out of his past through his character and the present motives aroused by the circumstances that challenge him. In either words, the Determinists hold, that a man's will is not the uncaused cause of his volitions; rather that his volitions are caused by his present character and motives, and his present character and motives in turn are caused by his previous character and motives that have operated in his actions before. You go back, back, endlessly back, back not merely to his birth, but to his parents, his whole ancestry and the whole world, in fact—

everything in the whole world that brings this man to this position at this moment, with all the circumstances impinging upon him. Those are the causes that make his decision what it is; and unless the whole world were changed, his decision could not be other wise than what it is. He could not have chosen otherwise. To expect him to have chosen otherwise is to expect the whole past to be somewhat different.

It is said that a man faced with alternatives always chooses what appears best to him. Does anyone dispute it? But what appears best to a man is determined by the kind of man he is. What appears best to one man is not what appears best to another. Again the decisive factor is his past, his character, his predilections, his prejudices, his motives.

It is said that at any moment a man's volitions are determined by his predominant desire. At any moment when we face a difficult choice, we have conflicting tendencies and inclinations; and as we sort of teeter for the moment before we actually decide, one or another of these desires becomes dominant. What makes that one the stronger? Again, under these circumstances it is a man's past character, his whole biography, that causes one desire to predominate over the others and that one then determines the decision or choice he makes. Given the same character and the same motives the same decision must result.

If you even try to say, "Well, he could have chosen otherwise," you are presupposing that he could have been otherwise. Since he is not otherwise than what he was, since he is this man built up by his whole past, then the decision can be only this one. Hence, says the Determinist, the very thing that the Libertarian is asserting cannot be true. What is the Libertarian asserting? It is that, at a given moment, with everything in the past the same, with this man's character exactly what it is, with the circumstances what they are and his motives the same, he could have chosen otherwise than as he did. The Determinist says, "No, that is impossible. Only one choice was possible for him; he could not have chosen otherwise."

I have presented two of the Determinist's arguments, and now I want to present a third—a very special one. In the long history of this subject, in days when theology was queen of the sciences, in the six or seven centuries which saw the development of Jewish, Islamic, and Christian theology, there was a strong argument against free will on the part of those who believed in God.

It is said of God that He alone is the first cause. God alone is the uncaused cause. It is believed that God is omnipotent and omniscient, that God's will is always done, that everything is subject to God's will, and that nothing is uncaused by God. There is no happening which is not subject to the divine causal power and nothing which is not within the purview of the divine knowledge.

Now, if God alone is an uncaused cause, the will cannot be an uncaused cause. And God, being omnipotent and omniscient, foreordains and foreknows everything that happens. Hence, man's future decisions must be necessitated and must be intrinsically predictable for God, if not for us. To say that God is omniscient makes it impossible to say that anything is unforeseeable by God. Yet the Libertarian seems to be saying that a man's future choices are unforeseeable by anyone—including God with perfect and absolute knowledge. This is precisely what many theologians who affirm an omniscient and omnipotent deity have denied.

How does the Libertarian answer all these arguments? It might seem that the Libertarians would counter these attacks by denying the principle of causation—if there is an instance of an uncaused cause, and they say there is, then this invalidates the principle of causation—but in fact this is not their argument. No Libertarian, no defender or exponent of the doctrine of free will, has ever denied the universal principle of causation or has ever denied its universality. Not only do they say that the principle of causation is true, but it is universally true without exception. And what they understand themselves to be saying when they say this is that in the whole world of nature there is nowhere to be found an effect without a cause. An uncaused effect, they are saying (and here they are agreeing with the Determinists), is a contradiction in terms. But they qualify the principle of causation in a manner which leads them and the Determinists to part company. For, in their view, to say that there is no effect without a cause is not to say that there is no cause which is not itself an effect. Hence, the universal principle of causation can be affirmed without denying that the will is a cause producing effects though its acts are not effects produced by prior causes.

The will, they say, is an exceptional kind of cause. In the whole nature the will is the only active power. What is meant by an active power becomes clear if we contrast it with powers like our senses. When you have sensations, these sensations produce effects. You react in many ways to your sensory impressions. But your senses do not act unless they are acted upon. Sensations, as you experience them, are the effects of other causes—the various impulses of

light or sound or pressure that reach the sense organs. Hence, the senses are passive powers. They act only when they are acted upon. What is being said about the will is that the will acts without being acted upon. It is an agent—a primary agent. Yet the Libertarian says that this does not violate the principle of causation, because the acts of the will are caused by the will itself. The will is the cause of its own acts. And so the acts which take place are effects that have a cause though that cause, the will, is not itself a caused cause.

The Libertarian then goes on to say that even though all physical causes necessitate their effects, the will is not a physical cause. It operates differently from other physical causes. All of our attention must be focused on the following point. The Determinists hold the view that in nature there is only one type of causation. It is the type of causation which is evidently manifest in the physical world. Perhaps the easiest way of making the point for you is to say that it is the kind of causation which is most manifest in simple classical mechanics—the kind of cause and effect relation which becomes evident to one in the study of elementary mechanics, or that one sees in the operation of machines. Though I do not mean that all of natural science is as simple as that, nevertheless that is the type of the physical cause. The Determinist is a fellow who is saying that all causes are of this type, whereas the Libertarian is saying that many causes—in fact, most causes—*but not all* are of this type. There is in addition an immaterial cause—the will. The mind, including reason and will, is not matter, is not a body, not an organ in the sense in which the eye is an organ; and therefore when it operates as a cause it operates differently as a cause.

Now, let me see if I can indicate what the difference is. In the physical world, given a particular cause, or set of causes, that cause has the power to produce only one effect. In the case of the will, according to those who think of it this way, it is a superabundant cause—a cause with so much power that it can produce any one of a number of effects. Its power extends to whatever is possible. The relation between cause and effect here is one to many, where in the physical world it is one to one (one cause, one effect).

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.