



FREEDOM OF THE WILL

MORTIMER ADLER

Part 2 of 2

Let us return to the idea that a man faced with several alternatives chooses what is best for him. The Libertarian argument stresses the importance of the word “chooses.” The point is that an actual choice is involved. We have seen how the Determinists account for the man’s decision; now, let us take the same man facing the same problem and see how the Libertarians have him decide. In the difficult choice there are different motives competing. There are reasons for acting one way and reasons for acting another way. The Libertarian maintains that these reasons in themselves are not determinative of the action. No one reason is strong enough to make the man decide. First the man must decide—and it is his decision to act on one reason rather than another which makes that reason stronger than the others. If it were otherwise, the Libertarian proposes, if any one reason of itself were strong enough to determine the action, the man would have no difficulty in making the deci-

sion. He would merely act as the reason dictated. It is the very difficulty that attests the existence of free will. Faced with a series of alternatives, we ourselves, by the act of choice, endow one alternative with greater attractiveness. None of them by itself is sufficiently attractive. None of them by itself is sufficiently attractive to move us. It is only by choosing that we take this one and make it attractive enough to act upon. And in that fact lies the freedom of our choice.

Since that is difficult to understand, I am going to expand it a little further. Even if there is no free will, as there may not be the Libertarian is saying that if you are introspective about your own experiences, this does have some similitude to what you feel. To understand this, you must remember some difficult decisions you have made, not easy ones—times when you went for several days or several weeks or months before you could make up your mind whether to do this or that. What happened? Suppose it is a choice between A and B. You put the reasons down in one column for A and the reasons down in the other column for B. Now if the reasons you put down in one column had demonstrative force—if they proved, as proof in geometry is proof, that decision A was the right decision and disproved decision B—you would have no problem. You would have proof, and if you are a rational person, your decision would follow. It would be completely determined by the probative reasons. But, says the Libertarian, the reasons are never like that. No matter how many you put down they will always be inconclusive. So, when you come to the end of your deliberation, you will have two opposed practical judgments, each supported by, reasons. Now, your action will follow from whichever one is the last judgment you hold on to. But what makes that judgment the last one? What makes you terminate the process of deliberation by taking this judgment, the A judgment as opposed to the B? The reasons did not do this for you. It is your will that did it. You voluntarily choose judgment A. In that fact lies your freedom of choice.

Another way in which the Libertarian answers the Determinist is to say that certainly a man's character has influence on his decision, but the simple fact is (and everyone knows this to be a fact) that a man can either act in accordance with his character or against it. If we could never act except in accordance with our character we could never change our character. But there is perfectly clear evidence that men do change their characters. This means that it must be possible for men to act against their characters. Moreover, the character itself, says the Libertarian, is formed by free choices. Hence, since it is formed by free choices, it cannot determine the

choices themselves in the way that makes them unfree: This is not to deny that we can with fair or even high probability predict a man's decisions. And finally, with regard to the intrinsic unpredictability of human decisions, the Libertarian position is that science will never succeed in the sphere of human behavior as it has in the sphere of physical phenomenon.

With respect to the theological argument, those Libertarians who affirm an omnipotent and omniscient God take one of two positions. Some say that God is omnipotent and omniscient and man's will is free; but how to reconcile these things, they do not know. They acknowledge a great mystery here. Other theologians hold that there is no incompatibility between God's omnipotence and omniscience and man's free will. They have argued this in two ways.

One argument is as follows. God does not *foreknow* anything. *Foreknowing* puts God in time as if there was some future for him: But God, being eternal, is out of time in an eternal present. All things past, present or future are simultaneously present to the divine vision. He knows them as actual, not as future and about to happen. There is no conflict between what God actually knows and the unpredictability of future choices from the point of view of man's knowledge of the future.

The second argument is as follows. It boldly maintains that a man's future free choices are essentially unknowable with certitude even to God. God is omniscient, but it is no limitation on God's omniscience not to know what is unknowable. Omniscience means knowing everything that is possible to know. Not to know what it is impossible to know is not to be limited in knowledge.

The crux of the matter so far is this. On the one hand, we have a materialistic and mechanistic theory of causation or, to put that even more neutrally, a theory of causation in which there is only one kind of cause, operating one way: and an opposite theory of causation which tries to say that there are material and mechanical causes and causes that operate in the world of mind or spirit, operating in a different fashion.

Now, let us turn to a subsidiary dispute, which is as interesting though not as fundamental. I am going to start with the Libertarian position. He says what many of us would say: I affirm free will or free choice because the freedom of man's choice is presupposed by the whole world of morality; should I deny freedom of choice, I would make nonsense of all my moral judgments. We praise and

blame human beings for what they do, and in accordance we reward and punish them. But to reward and punish men or praise and blame them is tantamount to holding them responsible for their acts. But men cannot be held responsible for acts they did not freely choose to perform. Hence, if anyone denies free choice, he is completely removing the basis for moral responsibility; and when you remove the basis of moral responsibility you make nonsense of praise and blame, reward and punishment. Since mankind is not going to give up praise and blame and reward and punishment, since it insists upon holding men morally responsible for their acts, it is better to affirm that which is presupposed. For not to do so would be self-contradictory. It would be to insist upon a conclusion without a premise. Therefore, the Libertarian says, we must either give up the whole fabric of our moral and social life or we must assert that men have free choice.

The second argument the Libertarian advances is that we are directly or immediately conscious of making free choices. Every moment of the day I seem to be conscious of the fact that I am choosing to do this or that. I do not feel myself internally forced. I do not feel my past operating on me. When I am faced with an option, particularly when it is a difficult one, I struggle with my will to decide this way or that. I am conscious, says the Libertarian, that I am forming my own volitions. Such evidence either directly supports the existence of free will or it at least gives rise to the belief that we have free will. That belief, then, raises a serious problem for the Determinist to deal with.

The Determinist enters the debate in the following manner. With respect to the interrelation of free choice and responsibility, there are two kinds of Determinists. William James pointed out that there are “soft” Determinists and “hard” Determinists. Let me tell you first what the soft Determinists say.

The soft Determinists say that the dilemma about free choice and responsibility can be avoided. They say that the only thing required in order to hold a man responsible is that he be not coerced. If what he does is an expression of what he wishes to do, then even if he does not determine what he wishes to do—even if his wishes, his decisions and choices are internally determined by his past—you can hold him responsible when he acts voluntarily. You cannot hold a man responsible for failing to act if he is chained. You cannot hold a man responsible for acting if he is pushed by sheer force. But if what he does comes from him because it is a voluntary action—not a compelled one, not a forced one—then whether or not that action flows from free choice is of no importance, so far

as responsibility is concerned.

They go on to say, moreover, that when you punish him you can alter what he is going to do in the future, just as you punish an animal and change his behavior. The rewards and punishments you give animals change their future conduct. That is the purpose of punishment and reward: changing future conduct. You praise and blame people to affect their future conduct. If you can affect their future conduct by praise and blame and reward and punishment, that is quite sufficient for responsibility. Responsibility, *which is equivalent to alterability by punishment or alterability by praise and blame*, is based simply on voluntary conduct.

What the soft Determinist is saying is that if a man is able to act as he wishes, the actions he performs can be imputed to him. They are his acts, not somebody else's. If they are his acts, he is responsible for them. If he is responsible for them, you should praise and blame him, reward and punish him; and such reward or punishment, praise or blame, will affect his future conduct.

Praise and blame and reward and punishment should have only a prospective significance. They should look only to the future, have no relation to the past. You cannot affect the past; you cannot change the past; you cannot do anything about the past at all. Hence you should punish and reward therapeutically, remedially, prospectively, with an eye to getting different results in the future.

The hard Determinist recognizes that moral responsibility presupposes the existence of free will. Mere voluntariness will not do. If the voluntary act does not itself flow from a free choice of the will or a free choice made by the self, then the individual is not responsible for his act. The reason why the hard Determinist says this is that he thinks punishment must be retributive as well as prospective. You can praise and blame men for what they have done even if they are dead now and you cannot change them. And if you can do that, rewards and punishments must be retrospective as well as prospective. But they cannot be retrospective, says the hard Determinist, unless there is free choice—not just voluntariness. The hard Determinists thus agree that the Libertarian is right if he says free will is required for responsibility; but, being hard Determinists, they also say that free will does not exist and therefore there can be no moral responsibility. There is no basis for rewards and punishments, praise and blame. You see why this is called the position of the hard Determinists?

The Libertarian, faced with these two opponents, agrees with the

hard Determinist on the analysis of freedom and responsibility and disagrees with him only on the existence of the freedom in question. He, too, says that praise and blame must be retrospective, and that punishment must be retributive as well as remedial. When you praise or blame dead men you are not affecting their future conduct. Capital punishment does not have as its end the changing of the man's future conduct. Such a view of praise and blame and reward and punishment involves a view of responsibility that must be rooted, says the Libertarian, in free choice.

In addition, the Libertarian points to the criminal law. Distinguishing between degrees of homicide, we say a murder performed in cold blood with malice and forethought is a different kind of homicide from one done under provocation or in blind rage. The reason for this, the Libertarian says, is that there are degrees of freedom here. In one case, the man's choice is completely free; in the other case, his choice is not as free. There are cases where the man acts in frenzy where he lacks freedom entirely, and then we say he is not responsible at all. Our whole body of criminal law must be without foundation if our differentiation of the degrees of responsibility, based upon degrees of freedom, were not true,

With regard to the evidence of consciousness, the Determinist simply dismisses it as illusory. Our feeling of freedom is only an illusion. The Libertarian replies that the only grounds for thinking it is an illusion is a prior obstinate belief in determinism. He accuses the Determinist of denying that which he feels to be true on the basis of a prior prejudice.

I am now going to deal with two very special attacks on Determinism, and one very special argument against free will. Then I will sum up. I can say without exaggeration that these special attacks have never been answered. Up to this point, there has been a kind of balance. One side argues one way, and the other side meets the argument. The two special attacks on Determinism I am now going to state are, curiously enough, answered by no Determinist. I have never found in the literature any response to these criticisms or objections.

The first of these two special arguments is as follows. If the judgments of the mind are all necessitated as the choices of my will are supposed to be necessitated, scientific method is meaningless. What does a scientist or a philosopher who is trying to think objectively do? He is trying to look at the weight of the reasons and the weight of the evidence and decide which is the right solution of the problem. But if, as he approaches the problem, the decision he is

going to make is determined by his past, why bother with scientific method? Why bother with the canons of logic? Why bother with any of the principles of reason at all?

Let us, for example, apply this to this very issue—the issue between the Libertarians and the Determinists. Suppose I say to you, “How many of you are Determinists?” and you raised your hands, and then I say “How many of you are Libertarians?” and you raised your hands. If the reason why you responded as you did was your past, then what is the argument all about? Why did I even bother to give the lecture or present the arguments? There is no real issue here, there is nothing worth debating, if our intellectual decisions are determined.

William James, who was much agitated about this problem, told a wonderful story bearing upon this particular point. He said a man was walking down a narrow street one day. As he walked down, he saw in a second floor window on one side of the street a sign which said “Determinist Club”; on the other side he saw a sign which said “Free-Willist Club.” He went into the Determinist Club first and said he would like to join. The girl behind the desk said, “Why did you come in here?” He said, “I freely chose to.” And of course they threw him out. So he went across the street into the Free-Willist Club and they said, “Why did you come in here?” He said, “I had no choice.” And they threw him out.

The other thing the Libertarian says is that the question about free will is a very difficult one, an issue where neither side can prove its case conclusively. Both sides must appeal to certain basic assumptions that never will be proved in the full sense of proof. The assumptions about causes which the Determinist makes are important for science in respect to the whole physical world if not the sphere of human behavior; and the Libertarian’s assumption about free choice is important for the whole human world in the sphere of morals and politics. Faced with this conflict of assumptions, you are free to adopt both of them—each in its own sphere. When you say “I adopt the Determinist assumption for the whole physical world” and “I adopt the Libertarian assumption for the moral world of human behavior,” you do that freely. The Libertarian says that this is consistent with being a Libertarian, but not consistent with being a Determinist. Since this is the only rational solution of the matter, the Libertarian says that he has the better position.

I turn finally to one more argument against free will, and it is a strong one. It begins with Hume, who said that all causes are effects of prior causes, and that all causes necessitate their effects.

What is not caused in this way is nothing but pure chance. If a man's decisions or choices are not caused in this way, then they are purely matters of chance. But how can you hold a man responsible for what happens by chance? In fact, this is one thing we do not hold a man responsible for. We can hold him responsible for what he does intentionally or negligently, but if something happens by chance we do not hold anyone responsible. Hence, if free will did exist, it would preclude moral responsibility. Since free will involves the element of chance, it would make moral responsibility impossible; and we would have no basis for praise and blame, rewards and punishments.

Another form of this argument is as follows. Only that which flows from a man's established character can be imputed to him as his choices or his actions. You look at a man and you say, "Those acts are properly his. They flow right out of his character," But if a man has free will, according to the Libertarian theory of free will, then, Hume contends, his choices do not flow determinately from his character. Given the same character, the individual can make diametrically opposite choices. If given the same character, the individual can make diametrically opposite choices, then those choices cannot be imputed to the individual for they are not better than chance. But again, you cannot hold a man responsible for what happens by chance. What happens by chance cannot be imputed to him. Hence, free will, if it did exist, would preclude moral responsibility.

The Libertarian replies to this argument as follows. The will or the self is the cause of a man's decisions, not his character, even though his character may influence the decisions he makes. Since his decisions flow from his will or his self, even though not from his character, they can be imputed to him and he can be held responsible for them. It is only on the Determinist's theory of causation that the absence of necessity becomes identical with chance. On the Libertarian theory of causation, a free choice is caused even if it is not necessitated. There is no element of chance at all in a freely caused choice. Hence free choice does not preclude moral responsibility.

Let me go at once to the crux of the matter. Both sides agree that chance (total absence of causation) does not exist in the universe. Both sides agree that if man's decisions were chancy, he could not be held responsible for them. The question, therefore, boils down to this: Does free will reduce to chance? Does free will involve chance in any way? If it does, the Determinist is right.

If the Libertarian shared the Determinist's understanding of causation, he would have to agree with the Determinist's rejection of free will as non-existent and as precluding responsibility (just as chance precludes responsibility).

But according to the Libertarian's theory of causation, free choice does not involve even the slightest trace of chance. If the Determinist shared the Libertarian's understanding of causation he would similarly have to agree with the Libertarian's affirmation of free will, for he would have no grounds for denying its existence, and would see that it does not preclude responsibility.


The crux of the matter, therefore, lies in these two theories of causation. The Determinist's basic point is that all causes are of the same type, the type that we find in the physical world or in the mechanical action of bodies. In this type of causation, there is no uncaused cause and no non-necessitated cause. Hence, the causal initiative and the causal indeterminacy required for free will is tantamount to causelessness or chance. The Libertarian's theory, on the other hand, is that there are different modes of causation—one that applies in the physical world, the realm of matter and one that applies in the spiritual world, the realm of mind, reason, will. In the sphere of mind, the will as an active power can cause without being caused and can cause any one of a number of alternative effects, though all the circumstances and his whole past and character remain the same. And it can do this precisely because it is a spiritual power which operates causally in a different way from the way in which bodies operate and physical events are caused.

Most of you, I am sure, stand on one side or the other in this argument. It is hardly a subject about which one can be neutral. I will ask you all to pronounce to yourself which side you affirm.

The answer you give yourself comes from the view you take of the nature of things. If you take the view that there is nothing in the world except bodies, material forces and material actions, I am sure you give the Determinist answer. But if you say, "No, there is room in this world for the immaterial, for a spiritual power," then you probably give the Libertarian answer. Further, your answer is affected by which view of responsibility you take—whether you think you can praise or blame dead men, whether you think rewards and punishments are retributive, whether you think that the punishing of men is different from the punishing of animals. On the Determinist view, you punish animals to change their future conduct.

If you feel that animals are not morally responsible, and punish them with an intent different from that which applies when you punish men, then you will be on the free will side. If you think we should treat men and animals in exactly the same way, and reward or punish them for the same reasons, then you are on the Determinist side.

Where do I myself stand? I will tell you very quickly. Having lived through this, not just tonight but for many years, I hold the Libertarian view as against the Determinist because I think there is strong, almost conclusive but not quite conclusive, evidence for the immateriality of the human mind—evidence that it is not a physical organ, that it is not like the eye or the arm or a muscle, not something that has mass or the dimensions which matter has. In addition to my affirming the immateriality of the human mind, I think that the Libertarian has a much sounder and more comprehensive theory of causes. Furthermore, I agree with the “hard” Determinist against the “soft” Determinist that moral responsibility, praise and blame, rewards and punishments, cannot be rationally founded except on the basis of man’s having freedom of choice. I hold this view because I think that praise and blame can be significantly retrospective and punishment must be in part retributive.

Finally, I think there is no answer to the two special arguments against Determinism. One, you will recall, is that Determinism makes nonsense of the whole intellectual life, of scientific inquiry, of rational debate, of argued differences of opinion, the reality of all issues. If the Determinist is not determined by his past and his character to be a Determinist, then he is one by free choice on his part just as I am a Libertarian by free choice; but if the position one takes on this issue is a matter of free choice, then clearly it is sound to take the Libertarian position. 

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