



FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Mortimer Adler

1

When people think of freedom what they tend to have in mind is a freedom the existence of which cannot be and has never been denied. It is also a freedom that everyone possesses and of which no one can be completely deprived.

It is the freedom we possess when we are able to do as we please or wish. We possess it to the highest degree under the most favorable circumstances: the absence of coercion, restraint, duress, and the presence of enabling means. Such obstacles as coercion and duress limit the extent to which we can do as we please; so does the lack of enabling means. As R. H. Tawney said, the poor man is not free to dine at the Ritz.

However, no one, not even the slave in chains or the prisoner in solitary confinement, is totally devoid of the freedom to do as he wishes. There are still some respects, however slight, in which he can do as he pleases.

Another circumstantial freedom is political liberty. It is a freedom possessed by those who are fortunate enough to live in a republic, under constitutional government, and who have been enfranchised as citizens with suffrage—with a voice in their own government. That such freedom exists cannot be denied, for at least some human beings if not for all; but some voices have been raised against its being desirable for or deserved by all.

The two remaining types of freedom do not depend upon outer circumstances, and both have been the subject of controversies in which their existence has been denied.

One of these is the acquired freedom of being able to will as one ought. Only through acquired moral virtue and practical wisdom does anyone come to possess such freedom. It is a freedom from the passions and the sensuous desires that lead us to do what we ought not to do, or not to do what we ought to do. When, in the conflict between reason and the passions, reason dominates, then we are able to will as we ought in conformity to the moral law, or to normative rules of conduct.

Obviously, those who deny that there are any objective moral values, any valid oughts or normative prescriptions; cannot help but deny existence to the moral freedom thus described. Even those who affirm its existence do not regard it as having universality. Whereas the circumstantial freedom of being able to do as one wishes is possessed to some degree by everyone, even those under the most unfavorable circumstances, individuals either have moral freedom or lack it entirely; they either have or have not acquired the moral virtue and practical wisdom on which it depends.

We are left, finally, with a fourth type of freedom that has been the subject of the most extended and intricate controversy over the centuries. Its existence has been affirmed by a large number of philosophers and denied by an equally large number, most of them modern, and also by a host of modern scientists.

For those who affirm its existence, it is universally possessed because it is regarded by them as inherent in human nature: it is a natural freedom, neither affected by circumstances nor dependent on acquired developments.

This natural freedom is the freedom of the will in its acts of choice. Freedom of choice consists in always being able to choose otherwise, no matter what one has chosen in any particular instance. As

contrasted with a freedom that consists in being able to do as one wishes, it might be described as freedom to will as one wishes.

When we declare that freedom is a natural human right we must have in mind the two circumstantial freedoms—the freedom to do as one pleases (within the circumscription of just laws) and the political liberty that comes with citizenship and suffrage. There is no meaning to the statement that one has a right to moral liberty, which can be possessed only with acquired virtue and wisdom; or a right to freedom of choice which, if it exists, is a natural endowment possessed by all.

However, unless freedom of choice does exist, it is difficult to understand the basis of our right to these other freedoms. If we do not have freedom of choice, what reason can be given for our right to do as we please or to exercise a voice in our own government?

These considerations, and there are others to which we will subsequently come, make the controversy about the existence of freedom of choice one with far-reaching consequences.

2

This chapter differs from all its predecessors. In them we dealt with mistaken philosophical views the errors or inadequacies of which could be pointed out and corrected. That cannot be done here.

With knowledge of all the ins and outs of the controversy, I cannot show that the exponents of free choice are right and that the determinists who oppose free choice are wrong. The philosophical defect here is not so much a demonstrable philosophical error as a manifest misunderstanding of the issue itself.

That misunderstanding lies mainly on the side of the modern philosophers and scientists who are determinists. What I am saying here is not that their denial of freedom of choice is a demonstrable mistake, but rather that they do not correctly understand what they have denied—the premises upon which an affirmation of freedom of choice rests.

Prior to the end of the nineteenth century, determinists held that all the phenomena of nature are governed by causal laws through the operation of which effects are necessitated by their causes. Nothing happens by chance, in that sense of the term which regards a chance event as something uncaused. In their view, an intrinsically

unpredictable free choice is exactly like a chance event and so cannot occur within the natural domain. While it is true that a free choice and a chance event are both unpredictable with certitude and precision, it is not true that both are uncaused.

Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century and becoming more significant in our own time, science added statistical laws or probabilistic formulations to causal laws, and in doing so introduced aspects of indeterminacy into the realm of natural phenomena.

Such indeterminacy, however, does not reduce to the causelessness of chance. A handful of philosophers and Nobel Prize winning scientists advanced the supposition that such indeterminacy might make room for freedom of choice within the bounds of nature; but more sober minds rightly dismissed the supposition. The causal indeterminacy involved in certain scientific formulations, especially those of quantum mechanics, simply bears no resemblance to the causal indeterminacy involved in freedom of choice.

What the determinists who deny freedom of choice on the grounds stated above fail to understand is that the exponents of free choice place the action of the will outside the domain of the physical phenomena studied by science. If their theory of freedom of choice conceived it as a physical event in the same way that the action of our senses and the motion of our passions are physical events, then they would have to accept the arguments of the determinists as adequate grounds for denying free choice.

But that is not the case. The will, as they conceive it, is an intellectual, not a sensuous, appetite or faculty of desire and decision. In their view, the human mind, consisting of both intellect and will, is to be sharply distinguished from the senses, the memory, the imagination, and the passions. The latter may operate according to the same principles and laws that govern all the other phenomena of the physical world, but the intellect and the will, being immaterial, do not act in accordance with these principles and laws. They are governed by laws of their own.

The acts of the intellect are either necessitated or they are arbitrary. They are necessitated when they are acts of genuine knowledge, for the intellect cannot say no to a self-evident truth, nor can it say no to any proposition that is supported by evidence and reasons that put it beyond a reasonable doubt or give it predominance over all contrary opinions.

In the above cases, all its judgments are necessitated. Only when it is confronted with mere opinions, unsupported by evidence and reasons, is its judgment arbitrary—an act of the intellect moved by a free choice on the part of the will rather than an act of the intellect moved by the truth laid before it. In neither case is the action of the intellect uncaused or a chance event.

Like the acts of the intellect, some acts of the will are necessitated and some involve freedom of choice. The only object that necessitates the will is the complete or total good. In the presence of the complete or total good, it cannot turn away from it and will anything else. Thus, when happiness is understood to be the *totum bonum*—the sum of all real goods—it attracts the will with necessity. We cannot will not to seek happiness. Our willing happiness as our ultimate end is not an uncaused act.

All other goods are partial goods. Each one is one good among others. In the presence of such goods as objects of desire, the will is not necessitated, which is another way of saying that its choice of one rather than another partial good is a free choice on its part. Such indeterminacy on the part of the will is utterly different from the causal indeterminacy to be found in quantum mechanics. But in both cases, the causal indeterminacy does not reduce to chance—the complete negation of causality.

The theories of the freedom of the will and of freedom of choice are many and complicated. I do not pretend that the foregoing briefly stated points do justice to their variety and complexity. However, I do claim that, in all of them, the affirmation of freedom of choice rests on the points made—the immateriality of the will; the difference between the way its acts are caused and the operation of causes in the realm of physical phenomena; and above all the insistence that the causal indeterminacy of the will does not reduce a free choice to a chance event.

What happens by chance, according to the determinists, is totally unpredictable; and since, according to them, nothing is totally unpredictable, nothing happens by chance. While the causally indeterminate events in the realm of quantum phenomena and the causally indeterminate acts of free choice are both intrinsically unpredictable (in the sense of not being predictable with the certitude appropriate to the necessitation of effects by their causes), they are not totally unpredictable. Prediction is possible in both cases with varying degrees of probability. The possibility of probable predictions dismisses the identification of such causal indeterminacy with chance.

The determinists' misunderstanding of what is involved in freedom of choice makes the historical controversy about this subject an illusory one. The issues are not joined.

The determinists do not argue against the truth of the premises on which the affirmation of free choice rests, but reject free choice as something that it is not (i.e., a chance happening) and as something that, if not chance, cannot occur within the domain of physical phenomena, which they regard as exhaustive of the real world.

The exponents of free choice do not argue for the premises on which their affirmation of free choice rests. They do not successfully attempt to show that the domain of physical phenomena is not the whole of reality or how the causality that operates in the realm of immaterial phenomena differs from the causality that operates in the physical world. The only thing they are sufficiently clear about, and rightly insistent on, is that freedom of choice as they conceive it is not to be identified with chance. And this is the one thing that the determinists stubbornly ignore.

Though both sides fail to come to grips with one another, the main failure of understanding is on the side of the determinists.

3

The controversy between the determinists and the exponents of freedom of choice goes beyond the denial and affirmation of that freedom. It concerns such questions as whether moral responsibility, praise and blame, the justice of rewards and punishments, depend on man's having freedom of choice.

David Hume was certainly correct when, having first identified a free choice with mere chance, he concluded that moral responsibility was incompatible with free choice. What a person does by chance, he cannot be held responsible for, praised or blamed for, rewarded or punished for. Hume's error, of course, was in the identification of free choice with chance.

The determinists in recent times have divided into two groups—the soft-determinists and the hard-determinists. The soft-determinists hold the view that the circumstantial freedom of being able to do as one pleases provides sufficient grounds for attributing moral responsibility to those who act with such freedom. They can be praised and blamed, rewarded and punished, for what they do,

even though what they do was not freely chosen on their part, because they could not have chosen otherwise.

They were determined by their entire past, by everything that entered into the constitution of themselves, to act as they did. However, their action, proceeding from themselves as thus constituted, was *their* action and so they can be held responsible for it.

The hard-determinists disagree. While denying freedom of choice, they concede that, without it, no one should be held morally responsible for what they do; no one should be praised or blamed, rewarded or punished.

As against the soft-determinists, the exponents of freedom of choice maintain that such freedom is indispensable to every aspect of the moral life. How can anyone be held responsible for an act that he could not avoid having chosen to perform—that was a product of the factors in his present makeup deriving from his whole past? Why should the individual be praised or blamed, rewarded or punished, for acts not freely chosen, acts that might have been different had he chosen otherwise?

The punishment for criminal actions may have some pragmatic or utilitarian justification. It may serve the purpose of reforming the criminal and of deterring others from committing the same crime, thus protecting society in the future from such depredations. But how can punishment be retributively just if the criminal was not morally responsible for what he did because it was not a free choice on his part?


On these counts, in my judgment, the position taken by the exponents of free choice is sounder than the position taken by the soft-determinists. There are still other considerations in its favor.

One turns on the resolution of the issue between those who regard moral values and prescriptive judgments as matters of mere opinion and those who regard moral philosophy as genuine knowledge. If the latter view prevails, moral virtue—the habitual direction of the will to the right end and the habitual disposition of the will to choose the right means for achieving that end—is an indispensable (a necessary, but not sufficient) ingredient in the pursuit of happiness.

What merit would attach to moral virtue if the acts that form such habitual tendencies and dispositions were not acts of free choice on the part of the individual who was in the process of acquiring mor-

al virtue? Persons of vicious moral character would have their characters formed in a manner no different from the way in which the character of a morally virtuous person was formed—by acts entirely determined, and that could not have been otherwise by freedom of choice.

The other consideration concerns controversies in science and philosophy—controversies over serious issues about what is true and false, or more and less true. What do these controversies amount to if they cannot be settled or resolved by the appeal to better evidence and better reasons?

Certainly they cannot be thus settled if the better evidence and better reasons do not necessitate the intellects of the parties to the issue. Such necessitation is different from the causal determination of a scientific or philosophical judgment by factors operating out of the past of the scientist or philosopher. 

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