

FREEDOM OF THE WILL

A Lecture by Mortimer J. Adler
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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).

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 decision. 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 re-

ward 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 Deter-

minist shared the Libertarian's understanding of causation he would similarly have to agree with the Libertarian's affirmation 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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