

PSYCHOLOGY AND FREE-WILL

IN the course of a long and interesting correspondence between William James and Shadworth H. Hodgson on the subject of free-will, the latter writes as follows: "Let us, as you say, have no more 'gnashing of the teeth over the free-will business'; let us agree to differ. The best of it is that we both believe in the reality of free-will, only that I think it can be reconciled with determinism, while you think indeterminism is required to make it conceivable."¹

Although some fifty years have passed since these words were written discussion concerning the freedom of the will and determinism continues varied only in its mode of presentation. The same difficulties which confronted the writers just mentioned confront the psychologist of to-day. These difficulties arise in fact from differences of opinion concerning the meaning of free-will on the one hand and determinism on the other. At bottom the problems involved are speculative rather than empiric, and the controversy to which we have alluded was conducted rather on the former than on the latter plane.

With the rise of modern empirical psychology and its recent developments in the direction of the study of personality, character, temperament and behaviour, as well as of psychopathic personalities and conduct, the question of freedom in human acts has become more acute. In the present essay the writer seeks to enquire into the meaning of psychological determinism and its relation to free-will, considering this question in the light of contemporary psychological investigation and practice rather than in that of pure philosophy.

The terms "psychological" or "psychical determinism" are in constant use in the psychological literature of the day. It is assumed, for instance, that everything in the psychical process is determined. This indeed is even more than a mere assumption or working hypothesis; it amounts to a profound

¹ Letter quoted in *The Thought and Character of William James*, by Ralph Barton Perry, I, p. 639.

conviction among those whose practice in psycho-therapy renders them familiar with the unconscious links which bind the apparently disconnected psychical processes together. Popular psychology is full of explanations of conduct as due to this or that or some other "determinant." The subject of determining motives looms larger. Physiology also has its contribution to make as to the determining influences on physique and temperament, and in consequence on character and behaviour, of the glands of internal secretion, or endocrine glands, such as the thyroid, the pituitary, the adrenals, and the rest. Both the psychical and physical development of the individual are profoundly influenced by the activities of these glands, picturesquely alluded to by some writers as "the glands of destiny or of personality."

The cumulative effect of all these discoveries in the domain of psychology and physiology is to bring about an attitude of doubt as to the reality of the belief in free-will, and to induce a kind of fatalistic outlook which, as William James remarked, is "radically vicious." "When a man has let himself go time after time," he writes, "he easily becomes impressed with the enormously preponderating influences of circumstances, hereditary habits and temporary bodily dispositions over what might seem a spontaneity born for the occasion. 'All is fate, he then says, 'all is resultant of what pre-exists.' Doubt of this particular truth (i.e. freedom)," he continues, "will therefore probably be open to us to the end of time and the most that a believer in free-will can *ever* do will be to show that the deterministic arguments are not coercive. That they are seductive, I am the last to deny; nor do I deny that effort may be needed to keep the faith in freedom, when they press upon it, upright in the mind."² James is also of the opinion "that the question of free-will is insoluble on strictly psychological grounds."

Apart however from the questioning of critical philosophy and of science, and apart from any doctrine of the nature of will and of freedom, it is a matter of almost universal belief that man is indeed a free-willing, self-determining being,

² *Principles of Psychology*, II, 574 seq.

morally responsible for his conduct, capable under normal circumstances and conditions of making rational judgments, deliberate choices, and in general of exercising some degree of control over himself, his impulses and desires. It is on the basis of this belief that society is organized and developed for its welfare as a whole and that of the individuals who constitute it. Whilst therefore we are ready to accept the postulate of determinism in regard to science, as we shall explain further on, we hesitate to do so in regard to psychology and the psychical processes of the human mind. Psychology, in proclaiming its adherence to this postulate of determinism, is exposed to the charge or at least to the suspicion of being destructive of, or hostile to, the common belief in freedom. That such suspicion and fear is shown at all, shows the immense importance attached to the belief in freedom. Apart from all its social implications, this belief appears to be intimately associated with the sense of integrity of the entire personality. Everything connected with the integrity of our minds is felt to be of the greatest importance to the conception we have of our Self or our *Ego*.

The question is whether the individual is merely a part of some mechanically conceived whole, or whether he has an autonomy of self-determination. The general belief is in favour of the latter conception of the *Ego* in relation to the universe at large. This seems to be supported by comparing our attitude to physical and mental illness; the latter is looked upon as in some way derogatory to our nature. Were not the insane in days gone by treated as criminals rather than as sick? And do we not often to-day look upon the neurotic person, if not as a malingerer, at least a bore? Physical illness by comparison receives far more sympathy on the whole than mental illness.

We must however pass from these random reflections to come to the immediate problem we have proposed for consideration, namely the meaning of determinism and freedom for psychology. The psychologist, as well as the layman in this subject, is confronted by the dual experience of freedom and determinism which philosophy throughout the ages has sought to explain, and to reconcile. Since the day, not long

distant, when modern empirical psychology began to detach itself from philosophical speculation, and to embark on its journey of exploration into the highways and by-ways of the human mind, of personality and behaviour, it has been implicitly governed by the assumption or postulate on which all natural science rests, and without which it is held that no science is possible. This postulate is that of the Uniformity of Nature, which assumes that there is to be found an orderly sequence in the phenomena of the universe. Whether the assumption is found ultimately to be valid is another question altogether; but science is based on the principle that every event has some determinable and determining cause. If it were not so, there could be no kind of explanatory but only descriptive science or knowledge. Psychology, in so far as it is an experimental and explanatory science, rests on a like foundation of determinism. As Professor John Lindworsky, S.J., puts it, "As soon as uniformities are recognizable one is in a position on the appearance of conditions which universally precede a determined phenomenon or even as soon as certain conditions are fulfilled to predict what results will appear. This type of explanation presumes therefore the observation of uniformities in psychical or mental events. Whether such uniformities exist in conscious life can only be shown by experiment."³

This, then, is one meaning of determinism as applied to psychological phenomena. When therefore we speak of psychological determinism, we *may* mean nothing more than the general scientific postulate, on which scientific psychology in common with other sciences is based. Psychology, as Edwin G. Boring points out, has come "to be scientific in the physical deterministic sense of science"; he adds however: "Determinism is far from being the 'truth.' The problem of freedom and determinism is the great unresolved problem of philosophy and the psychologist is quite free to make his choice. But if the eclectic refuses to admit freedom into his psychology it is because he thinks of psychology as scientific and is holding to complete determinism as a funda-

³ *Experimental Psychology*, p. 12.

mental postulate of science." In taking up this attitude in regard to psychology Boring is quite ready to leave others "free for freedom, because its occurrence cannot be empirically disproved."⁴

As a psychological problem, however, the question of freedom is bound up with the experience of voluntary choice and decision. Interesting and important investigations on the nature and conditions of acts of the will were carried out some years ago by a group of Continental psychologists working according to the introspectionist methods of the Würzburg school of experimental psychology. This marked a stage in the development of experimental psychology so long devoted to the study of perception, memory, attention, and other like matters. Among the investigators we make special reference here to the study of Michotte and Prüm on the phenomena of voluntary choice.⁵ The work is an extensive one and we can but relate the main conclusions reached. The task undertaken was itself a simple one, but so designed as to cover the essentials of voluntary choice as it occurs in everyday life. It consisted in having to choose for serious motives between adding and subtracting two numbers presented on a card to the subject taking part in the experiment. The subject had at the end of each experiment to report fully on his experience during the operation as may have been observed introspectively. It was found constantly that the mental processes involved therein followed a certain course, commencing with the knowledge of something to be done, of an end or purpose; motives or reasons for acting then intervened and were subjected to deliberation or discussion. A choice is made between the alternatives present in consciousness, namely doing this rather than that, of continuing or arresting a given operation, of doing or not doing some act, again for some motive or other. Finally the consciousness was reached of decision to act, "This must be done" or "I must do this and not that," or "do this" or "do not do this," after which came the decision to add or subtract as the case required. One outstanding feature which all the sub-

⁴ *Psychologies of 1930*, p. 117.

⁵ *Volontaire*, Louvain, 1910.

jects were agreed upon as being uniformly experienced was the consciousness of action referred to the Self as the agent—“*Conscience du moi*,” as they express it. In some cases, on the other hand, it was observed that the decision to act was reached impulsively without due deliberation or discussion of motives. When this occurred it was further noticed that the special element of consciousness of the Self as agent was lacking. Such experiences were at once described as involuntary and analogous to similar acts occurring in ordinary conditions. With regard to the question of freedom or liberty in the act of decision, this appears to have been only vaguely experienced, if it was at all. The subjects of the experiments, the authors relate, “never, it is true, had the impression of liberty after the experiment unless the consciousness of action had been present at the moment of decision, but inversely they frequently had the impression of not having acted freely although the decision had been voluntary and had included this phenomenon.” The vagueness in regard to the experience of liberty was in part due to the fact that the organization of the experiments was not primarily directed to the elucidation of this point, for which, it is stated, further investigations were required.

Much attention was also paid in these experiments to the experiencing of motives and of motivation as concerned with the act of choice. Various theories are current in psychology on the nature of motives. In this research a motive was taken to mean any reason or justification for acting. The word “motivation” includes the succession of phenomena connected with the appearance of motives in consciousness, their evaluation, selection, rejection, and so forth, as also their determining influence upon the final act of choice. Though the authors continually make use of such expressions as “determination” or “determined,” they do so only in a scientific sense and not as implying any anti-libertarian theory of determinism.

The importance of this research lies in the establishment by scientific introspection of the mental processes occurring in the act of voluntary choice, and the differences which obtain between the experience of such acts and of others

which are described as involuntary. The consciousness of the Self as the agent in the act of choice is also important, as it is upon this characteristic that other empirical psychologists base their descriptions of voluntary acts. The question of liberty or freedom in such acts still remains a matter of discussion. These experiments, however, seem to indicate all the elements contained in what we generally consider to be a voluntary as distinct from an involuntary act. Moreover the consciousness of suspending decision, of doing or not doing, contains the essence of that which philosophy maintains to be the sign of a free act.

It is at this point of the process, namely the decision to act which supervenes on that of the deliberation about motives, that, as Professor Stout remarks, "the vexed question of free-will as it is called arises. According to the libertarians the decision at least in some cases involves the intervention of a new factor not present in the previous process of deliberation and not traceable to the constitution of the individual as determined by heredity and past experience. The opponents of the libertarians say that the decision is the natural outcome of conditions operating in the process of deliberation itself. Now it must be admitted that the transition from the state of indecision to that of decision is often obscure, and that it frequently appears to be unaccountably abrupt. This makes it difficult or impossible to give a definite disproof of the libertarian hypothesis on psychological grounds."⁶

At this point we approach closely the confines of science and metaphysics, and we may ask whether the problem of liberty can be interpreted psychologically in the absence of any philosophic theory of the will itself. What the psychological observer experiences as freedom may or may not conform to the philosophical theory of liberty, but it does support the supposition that in voluntary acts there is freedom of some kind, such as is not to be observed in other acts commonly recognized and described as involuntary. The chief difficulty with which the empirical psychologist

⁶ *Manual of Psychology*, 3rd Ed., p. 711.

has to contend is, it appears, that of the so-called *liberty of indifference*. Thus another distinguished psychologist, Dr. William Brown, a staunch upholder of freedom and moral responsibility, writes as follows: "We can at once dismiss any doctrine of free-will of indifference. If we are to be psychologists, to believe in the possibility of giving a scientific account of the mind and its developments, we must believe in the general principle of *relevancy*. Whatever occurs in the mind is relevant to what has occurred before and what is occurring simultaneously."⁷ Dr. Brown is in no wise a determinist in the sense of denying free-will, as we have remarked already, but his statement seems to imply an epistemological assumption that what cannot be observed does not and cannot exist. But we cannot stay to discuss this point.

An objection somewhat similar to the above is found in the chapter on Freedom in Professor James Ward's book *Psychological Principles*. He distinguishes *external freedom* or freedom from constraint and *internal freedom*, which implies, he says, a certain sovereignty or autonomy of Self over against bodily appetites or blind desires, but the recognition of freedom in this sense "does not, however, commit us to allowing the possible existence of a *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*, sometimes called 'absolute indeterminism'; for that would seem to differ in no respect from absolute chance or caprice."⁸

Internal freedom, the being "free" to take either of two courses involves decision, and such decision is free in as much as it is made by the subject or agent and not for him. Internal freedom for the psychologist means, according to Ward, "self-determination and nothing more."

The main reasons invoked for the empirical psychologist's limitation in regard to liberty appear to lie in the rejection of the old faculty-psychology of will now generally discarded. Scientific psychology will have nothing to do with faculties, and Ward, as he says, prefers to think with Locke that "The question is not properly whether the will be

⁷ *Personality and Psychology*, p. 84.

⁸ 1st Ed., p. 404.

free, but whether a man be free." It may be true that "faculties" as such are not an object of consideration for the empirical psychologist, and moreover the "faculty psychology" to which Ward alludes is something quite remote, though possibly in a way derived, from the traditional philosophy of the soul and its powers.

With Locke we can prefer to speak of man being free, at least when we are studying man and personality from a psychological and not a metaphysical point of view; but with the philosopher we can also speak of the will being free, meaning thereby, as Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange has it, that the *free act* is "that which the will accomplishes with a *freedom* or a *dominating indifference* such that it is able not to accomplish it, so that although the circumstances remain exactly the same, the will is able on another occasion to suspend its act and not to act."⁹ From the psychological standpoint we could substitute "man" for "will" in the above statement, and adduce evidence not merely from our casual observation but from experimental studies on the voluntary act of choice such as we have already referred to in support of the above definition. The liberty of indifference, ascribed by philosophy to the will, does not mean absolute indeterminism nor, in consequence, chance or caprice, as Ward appears to think. If man is free, as the psychologist maintains, because he has the power of self-determination in acts of choice and decision, he is so in virtue of this quality of freedom in the human will. But at this point empirical psychology can carry us no further.

A final point remains to be considered, namely that of the problem of freedom in the light of the current psychology of personality and conduct. This kind of psychology differs from the empirical and experimental psychology of earlier days in being mainly concerned with the structure and dynamic forces of personality as a whole. It deals with all those factors of bodily physique, on the one hand, and on the other with the psychological factors, such as impulse, instinct, emotional drives, conscious and unconscious

⁹ *God: His Existence and His Nature*, Engl. Tr., II, p. 289.

motivations, which find their expression as determinants of character and conduct. Some writers, perhaps the less serious ones, are inclined to treat freedom of the will as a mere illusion and to regard the determinism of all these factors as absolute. But we find the distinguished psychologist William McDougall upholding freedom of the will in words which are worth recalling. "Will," he writes, "is character in action; and in our most complete volitions, following upon deliberation, the intellect co-operates fully with character. Volition then becomes the expression of the whole personality. But it is still the working of the conative impulses that spring from the instinctive dispositions, impulses working, not sporadically and in detachment from one another, but with a delicately balanced and more or less harmonious and unitary system. Does it then follow that we must accept the determinist position, must deny completely all freedom of the will, all power of voluntary decision to influence a course of events which has been predetermined from the beginning of the world? Or may we believe that the course of things is not strictly determined and predictable, and that human decisions are what they seem to be, real determinants, new beginnings from which new lines of determination rush on into the future? To me it seems that all we know of Nature and of the human mind justifies the latter alternative. The only ground for doubting it, offered by the strict determinists, is their belief in the universality of 'the law of causation.' But this belief, however stated, is not susceptible of being proved."¹⁰

So once more we may repeat, psychology can neither prove determinism nor disprove freedom of the will. It may, however, by the way it selects its data and the mode of presentation thereof, create the impression of fatality. The psychology of behaviour and conduct is to a great extent analytical, that is to say it seeks out and describes modes of behaviour, personality traits and psychological types, and endeavours to bring the multifarious "patterns" of behaviour into some kind of causal relationship with these other

¹⁰ *Outline of Psychology*, p. 446.

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pre-determining factors. This is particularly in evidence in the case of psycho-pathology, which has for its field of enquiry those behaviour patterns which are considered abnormal or pathologic. Its enquiries lead to the exploration of unconscious drives and motives, and frequently the picture is presented of the personality being actuated by forces which seem to lie quite outside conscious will and striving. Man seems therefore far less to act in a self-determining manner than to be acted upon or driven by internal secret forces.

On the other hand, and in practice, the medical psychologist seeks to reveal these inner unconscious forces, and their relation to external behaviour. By so doing he seeks to give the subject insight and to restore to him the capacity of rational judgment and volition, the capacity therefore of adjusting himself with greater freedom to the demands of real life with which he is faced. If the psychologist or psycho-therapist were consistent with his belief in strict determinism, such effort would be in vain; unless, as may be, he holds that his efforts merely end in substitutes, one set of determinants for another and more valuable set. But this he could scarcely do, for on what grounds, one might ask, does he judge values in relation to conduct? A strictly determinist science ignores the question of values. But the medical psychologist, unless he consider values as illusory, does have some conception thereof, and moreover in practice believes his subject capable of choosing between values, though under particular circumstances of mental illness or other disabilities his power of choice and decision is inhibited. The task of the medical psychologist is to remove such inhibitions in order to restore freedom and sanity.

Here we must leave the problem in so far as it concerns psychology. We do not pretend however to have exhausted all aspects of it. There are indeed wider aspects thereof which lead us into the domain of theology, whence it may be said the problem of determinism versus freedom has its ultimate roots.

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