

THE NATURE OF MORAL DECISION

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The ability to make a free moral choice is perhaps one of the most unique characteristics that man possesses. Hence, it is man as chooser to which we turn our attention.

The question before us is: what is the precise nature of a moral choice or even more basically is there any such thing as a free choice at all? To the latter question there are basically three answers. First, there is the reply of Indeterminism which asserts that man as chooser in some respects is independent of either external or internal causal factors. Secondly, the view of Determinism affirms that man's actions are both conditioned and caused by his environment whether the determination be spiritual (e.g. Theistic) or materialistic (e.g. Mechanistic). Now between these extremes is the school of Self-determinism that denies any external compulsion but acknowledges that human actions proceed from the inner nature and character of the self.¹

Now which of these views is compatible with a Christian Ethic and how can it be defended? It seems evident that the Christian is committed to a form of Self-determinism or modified Indeterminism for several reasons which shall follow, the most evident being that if man is not the author of his acts, then he cannot be held responsible for them in any intelligent sense of the word.

1. These are based on Runes' Dictionary of Philosophy and other sources.

But it is precisely because man is the efficient cause of his actions that we prefer the description, Self-determinism as over against the unrealistic connotation the term "Indifferentism" carries. However, we desire to distinguish the term, Self-Determinism from any connotations of the view in which the "self" is completely conditioned by environment since this amounts to an Indirect-determinism via the self. Further subsequent qualifications are also necessary and will be forth coming, but for now we prefer to defend an outline what may be called a circumscribed self-determinism. But for now, how shall we defend this view as over against Determinism?

The first² and most obvious source of evidence comes from our own subjective consciousness. That we are the author of our acts is immediately evident to us in conscious experience. I am cognizant that it was not only "I" who decided this but that I could have chosen that instead. Secondly, we can experiment with free choice as the scientist would. We can command ourselves to sit down, decide to lie down, elect to get up and run, and even choose to get married. Thirdly, social law presupposes that man is able to do good and shun evil; it holds men responsible for disobedience and chargeable for violations as some of us know only too well. Furthermore, the moral concepts of "praise" and "blame" are otherwise meaningless. That is, "If the will has no power of self-determination, morality is only a name, a delusion

2. The author is indebted to L. S. Keyser, A System of General Ethics for the substance of this argument.

of the brain....Kant said: 'Thou canst because thou oughtest'³. Fourthly, a sensible exegesis of Scripture clearly indicates that God asks men to make free choices, expects them to do so, and holds them responsible for choosing wrongly.⁴ To this we might add a brief satire, viz., that the Determinist himself is very likely to be inconsistent. For while he allegedly asserts that men's actions are externally determined and hence beyond their control, yet one is inclined to feel that such a philosopher might be a bit disturbed, vindictive, and accusative if someone were to burn his house or beat his wife. But whence cometh this blame if the ass^ualter could not help it?

However, we must hasten to say that we do not assign to these four arguments the strength of a rational demonstration, but merely contend that they are more plausible and probable than their alternatives.

Since then we are constrained to defend the stated self-deterministic view of freedom, let us proceed to explicate the precise nature of such a free act. No doubt the most basic distinction necessary is the need to differentiate between a voluntary and an involuntary act. All that favors Self-determination as vs. Determinism would likewise necessitate our saying that a free act is voluntary. By an involuntary act we mean one "done under compulsion or from ignorance"⁵. In distinction to this "it is

3. Ibid., p. 114.

4. See Jos. 24:15; Heb. 11:25; 1 Th. 3:18; Acts 17:30-31; II Thess. 1:8-9 etc.

5. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, p. 115.

the nature of the voluntary act that its principle (of motion) be within the agent, together with some knowledge of the end"⁶. But even here man has not parted company with some animal whose acts also fit this definition of voluntary. Hence, it is necessary to distinguish between a perfect and imperfect knowledge of the end. Imperfect knowledge of the end such as animals have apprehends it merely as an object to which they are directed by their very nature. While a perfect knowledge of the end conceives the end as an end. That is, while the animal's act is purposeful in so far as it is directed to an end, yet only man is self-conscious of his purposefulness. For example, a monkey may know he will be given a banana for dashing some paint on a canvas, but only the human artist is aware that he is creating a work of art.

Now it is precisely in this respect that rationality comes into the picture. This perfect knowledge of an end as an end is a distinguishing characteristic of human intelligence. Hence, the free act is not only self-caused but self-cognated. In other words, "that which distinguishes man from the purely natural creation...is his rational and moral nature".⁷

At this point we must add a qualification to our definition of freedom, viz., that it is a rationally circumscribed act of man. That is, man can be considered free only within the limits of his knowledge or rational ability. If this were not so then we would have to call the acts of the maniac and the imbecile responsible and free-moral acts. But since they are excused on

6. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, II, I, Q.6, Art. 2.

7. Keyser, p. 89.

the basis of irrationality, so then must ~~FREE~~^{DOM} be circumscribed within the sphere of rationality. Hence, a free act is a rationally circumscribed, self-directed, voluntary act of man. It is an act involving conscious cognition.

Furthermore, in this respect the free act must be a deliberate act as opposed to a reflexive⁸ one. For while a reflexive act is voluntary yet it cannot be considered as free for it is not directly under man's control, as for example, when having been unexpectedly stuck with a pin I say, "ouch". In this case even though I am aware of a painful sensation which causes me to exclaim "ouch", yet the act involves no free conscious deliberation on my part and hence was not under my control. Therefore, it becomes a necessary further qualification of our definition to add the words, deliberate (non-reflexive). That is, freedom is a rationally circumscribed, deliberate (non-reflexive), self-directed, voluntary act of man. ^{EVEN SO,} It is possible to conceive of a man executing an act which would not in the strictest sense be free assuming that he had no intentions of doing so, e.g., murder in self defense. Certainly a man cannot be held responsible for that which he did not intend to do. Hence, our definition of a free act must further be modified to include "an intention for which man is responsible". Or in other words, "a rationally circumscribed, deliberate (non-reflexive), self directed, intentional, voluntary decision of man for which he is responsible". Now a free act may be intentional in two respects: in itself,

8. In the sense of a conditioned reflex. Sometimes called, "spontaneous".

directly, or in cause, indirectly. That is, by purposefully becoming involved in circumstances where freedom is lost but responsibility is necessitated. As, e.g., David did when he chose to put Uriah on the front line of battle so that Uriah would be killed and he could have his wife, Bathsheba.

From the foregoing discussion one might gain the implication that we are expounding an "indifferentist" or "libertarian" view of freedom rather than the stated Self-determinism. On the contrary, what we are suggesting is that in order for man to have real freedom in an otherwise almost entirely determined moral situation there must be an element of "indeterminism", a factor of "indifferentism" or aspect of the "spontaneous" in his act. That is, he is "indetermined" in the act of choice not the fact of choice; "spontaneous" in the consent of will not the condition of intellect; and he is "indifferent" to external compulsion, not internal constitution. But that this sometimes small element of "freedom" is surrounded by many diminutive influences there is little question. That is to say, freedom can be diminished but it cannot be destroyed completely in the rational being. Now admittedly, "a man may be forced to do a thing against his will, but to say he can will a thing against his will is a contradiction".⁹

What then are the modifiers of the free act? They may be subdivided under violence, ignorance, and emotions. Violence or external force, e.g., as a gun in my back may rapidly diminish my freedom to call the police but not my desire to do so. Like-

9. Hodge, Systematic Theology, Vol. 1, p. 286.

wise, ignorance modifies freedom as we saw above. The axiom, "Ignorance of the law is no excuse" may be advisable on the social scene, but it is not applicable in the moral sphere. Man is not morally responsible for breaking a law in ignorance even though he is actually a law breaker. On the other hand while he is not accountable for a choice made in ignorance, yet he must be blamed for the choice of ignorance. That is, to choose ignorance in order to avoid responsibility is itself a responsible act. Finally, freedom is influenced by emotions both of desire and fear with all their subdivisions. Desire antecedent to an act to will diminishes freedom as the desire to catch fish may influence the tale of the trip to one's friends.

Likewise, fear will modify freedom ~~both~~ in acts done through fear ~~as vs.~~ those done with fear. An example of acting through fear is a soldier running from battle. An illustration of acting with fear is an amateur on the high trapeze. Now we do not mean to undermine the intensity of these modifiers by the paucity of our words about them. In fact, they have a tremendous influence on human freedom, but to say that they completely determine men's decisions is to destroy morality, responsibility, the validity of self consciousness, and one of the ^{most} unique characteristics of the "image of God" in man.

Thus far we have contended that, along with other things, morality necessarily implies freedom, i.e., we ought because we can. Likewise, freedom in a sense anticipates moral law. For if opposite choices were always equally good, then there would hardly be any point in the ability to choose between alternatives.

Why choose this when it is not better than choosing that?

Now this may seem to be a circular argument since we previously argued that morality implies freedom and now we suggest that freedom implies morality. However, this is not exactly the case. For moral law implies freedom actually, while freedom anticipates moral law only hypothetically. What the connection does show is that the two are logically related and, as a matter of fact, in experience, seem to be inseparably connected. That is, while hypothetically we can have freedom without ^{MORAL} responsibility, in actual fact we are not free to do what we want but what we ought. Perhaps we have here a hint that freedom is designed for morality. Nevertheless, this does leave room for a "morally indifferent" free choice. That is, while all moral acts must be free, yet some free acts may be a-moral. In this respect we might also note that while we should always choose what we know to be right yet we sometimes do not. But in any case we can never choose the evil because it is evil but because we see some good in it. Even suicide is enacted because the individual thinks it is the best way out.

However, we are obliged to acknowledge that in order for a free act to be moral, it must relate to a moral law. For how can a choice be "wrong" if there is not a possible alternative which is "right"? In which case we have a right and wrong, the substance of moral law.

But our most serious problems in freedom do not relate to the moral law but to the Moral Law Giver, and specifically for the Christian, to the Sovereignty of this Law-giver. In other words, if man has genuine freedom how can God have absolute

control over human history? It would seem that if some events depend on man's choice, then all events cannot depend solely on God's control. There are several equally painful alternatives to this question that we might mention in passing. First, we might limit sovereignty to the contingency of human freedom. However, this would make God less than both Natural and Revealed Theology assert Him to be. Secondly, we might affirm that human decisions are only apparently free but actually illusory. But this is a consent to Theistic Determinism and a ~~contradiction~~ ^{denial} to revelation concerning man's responsibility. In other words, we are obliged to acknowledge that both freedom and sovereignty are true since they must be true even if we cannot show how they are true for neither can it be demonstrated how they cannot both be true. Note that the essential problem is not the defense of either but the reconciliation of both. And that the difficulties involved in a denial of either are greater than the acceptance of both. Could it not be that these are infinite truths of which we find only a "paradoxical" grasp in a finite mind, but that are perfectly compatible within the infinite intelligence? We are inclined to feel that we are here faced with a "paradox", that is "a real rational inability to reconcile opposing truths not involving a demonstrable self-contradiction" even for the finite mind. In other words, we cannot prove that they are compatible nor can we demonstrate that they are contradictory.

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see John Calvin P 281 in John Wesley
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prefer it to be in accord with foreknowledge and admit the situation is paradoxical. That is, we believe God is able to bring about a necessary effect (the final salvation of the elect) by means of a contingent cause (the perseverance of the saints). Or in other words, that God is capable of realizing that which must be through that which may or may not be. This is not contradictory to possibility but complimentary of the Almighty.

It is at this juncture that we make a plea for the use of a different method in the "paradoxical" situation from that of the "problem" situation in philosophy. When the "problem" aspect prevails as in a crossword puzzle what we need is extensive study; more cognition and less contemplation. However, when the "paradoxical" aspect prevails as, for example, the mystery of the Trinity, then we need intensive study; more meditation and less memorization. In other words, "mysteries" are intended for meditation not logical scrutiny.

Closely akin to this is the problem that man is apparently free to resist God's sovereignty since if he could not, then he would be compelled by sovereignty which is an unadmissible Theistic Determinism. But if man can resist God, then he would seem to be more sovereign than God. To which we reply: perish the thought! For God sovereignly wills human freedom so that the fact of freedom is sovereignly given but the acts of freedom are contingently exercised. So that while God is responsible for the gift of freedom, yet man is accountable for its exercise. And precisely herein is the Christian's most potent answer to the problem of moral evil. So then in a sense, man is obeying God's

sovereign will by the fact that he exercises his freedom, while at the same time man is responsible for how he exercises it. Or to put it another way, God sovereignly wills that men should do right and may do wrong, not that they must do right.

However, this entire difficulty does point to an important fact, viz., that we are not to exalt the finitude of man's freedom above the infinitude of God's power. Therefore, we must give one last qualification to moral freedom, viz., that it is circumscribed by the sovereignty of God. Consequently, a moral act is "a sovereignty and rationally circumscribed, deliberate (non-reflexive) self directed, voluntary act of man relating to moral law for which he is responsible".

Another problem related to the application of freedom is the innumerable "borderline" cases. Sometimes it is seemingly impossible to determine whether an act is free or not even if we have all the introspective and external evidence available. In which case we merely note that ultimately it is not for us to determine but for the Moral Law Giver who knows "all the thoughts and intents of the heart". Furthermore, even humanly speaking the difficulty is not the logical deliniation of whether an act is or is not free but rather a psychological analysis of the case. If it is intentional, deliberate etc., of course it is free. The problem is determining whether or not it is intentional, deliberate, etc. And this task must ultimately belong to God.

A contemporary problem with freedom is that of its relation to modern Psycho-analysis. The basic assertion of psycho analysis is that "It is the unconscious that determines what the conscious

action shall be".¹⁰ Assuming this premise is true, is there any room left for freedom?

"If the practicing psychoanalysts were asked this...they would say that a person's freedom is present in inverse proportion to his neuroticism; in other words, the more his acts are determined by a malevolent unconsciousness, the less free he is. Thus they would speak of degrees of freedom. They would say that as a person is cured of his neurosis, he becomes more free....The psychologically well adjusted individual is in this sense comparatively most free... But if we contend that we are free only in the sense that we aren't determined by unconscious factors, then most human acts aren't free at all."¹¹

In terms of self determinism as we have defined it, this creates no serious problem but does cause us to realize what little freedom man actually possesses and leads us to reemphasize a former distinction, viz., that it is precisely in the deliberate conscious act as opposed to the reflexive and unconscious one that man is free and that while freedom is consciously directed yet it is unconsciously diminished.

There are several other important problems that relate specifically to the Christian view that we will briefly mention here although they are probably more theological than philosophical

The first is how this view of freedom relates to the doctrine of Total Depravity. In what respect is man's intellect and will depraved? We answer that sin has extended totally to every faculty of man, but that it has not intensively destroyed the basic function of these faculties. That is, man as a person is completely

10. Sellars and Haspers, Reading in Ethical Theory, p. 564.

11. Ibid.

depraved, but that the faculty of will in particular is commensurably influenced not completely incompacitated by sin. If it were, then this would amount to a deterministic view of freedom which is not admissable if man is responsible.

Another problem closely allied to this relates to the substantial unity of man. Does not this separation of man into intellect and will divide his essential personality? To this we reply that man is an ontological unity with distinct functions. It is "I" who choose by means of the faculty of will, and it is "I" who think by means of the faculty of intellect. But to say that the intellect chooses or the will thinks is absurd. Therefore, we contend that there is a real distinction between these faculties but not an ontological division. Man is not a bifurcated biped but a unified being with several centerally related faculties.

To summarize the foregoing elements of ~~our discussion~~ ^{line} we suggest that an adequate Christian view of human freedom should include the following elements.

1) It should be a form of Self-determinism which has at least an element of "indifferentism" in every moral choice as opposed to a complete determinism because: a) Self examination reveals that this is so; b) Scientific experimentation can demonstrate it; c) Social and moral law requires it; d) And a realistic exegesis of Scripture indicates it.

2) In order for an act to be "free" it must be voluntary, rational and intentional, i.e., self-directed, self-deliberated, and self-designed.

3) In order for a free choice to be a moral decision it must be exercised with respect to a moral law.

4) An adequate view of self-determinism should recognize, beside the element of "indifferentism" in every moral act, the many modifications and diminutions to freedom such as violence, ignorance, emotions, and for the Christian, sovereignty and depravity.

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Note: This paper deals with freedom in its narrow sense as the phase of man's personality which gives the "yes or no" response to a given moral situation.

There is a broader sense in which the whole man is free or in bondage, i.e.,

we are free to do evil but
we are only freed when we do the good.

(“ye shall know the truth and it shall free thee”)

Doing evil brings the bondage of will.

The more we freely do evil, the less we may freely do good etc → complete bondage.

is the misuse of freedom brings its loss
or diminishes it to the point of loss.

In Augustinian or Calvinistic words,

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this paper deals with free choice, not freedom
good or evil \ good only