

FREEDOM, DETERMINISM, AND REASON

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The traditional dispute over human freedom occurs in a context stressing ethical responsibility or the lack of it. The emphasis is upon will and the possible freedom it may have in asserting its authority over present desires, predispositions, passions, and the like. Reason enters into this picture usually in terms of a "rational will," or at least in the form of posing the question as to how far reason can control the irrational impulses and desires which "compel" us to act contrary to rational standards. Even if these are still thought of as meaningful issues by some philosophers, they will be of little significance in the current discussion, for my intent is to examine a few of the consequences of determinism for human reason rather than for anything called "will."

To do this I must first show that consequences for rationality do arise whenever the determinist thesis is interpreted to mean that human decisions and acts are caused by forces exterior to the individual and that this causation is present in all of the decisions and acts of this individual. Causation itself is not at issue; to say that a person decides to do *A* and that his decision "causes" the doing of *A* is not a problem in this discussion. Second, I shall explore or sample the opinions of selected rationalists and ask: what do they think about freedom? In the interests of brevity, my attention will be directed toward the great "swan-song" rationalists: Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. Although only a few paragraphs can be devoted to them, they occupied a sensitive position in the history of philosophy; they were as impressed by the power of reason as the Greeks, but they helped to usher in an age that could or would no longer build its metaphysics around the rational intuition they both wrote about and practiced. My purpose in including them at all in the discussion concerns the respect which they had for reason. I am curious to see if their respect for reason goes as far as to endow it with the freedom that is consistent with the establishment of independent norms of truth and validity. My third and final effort will be to note that although we no longer support the metaphysics of philosophical rationalism, we must still attend to the problem of just how much we respect reason and the freedom its proper exercise presupposes.

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The first question mentioned above is: do consequences actually arise from determinism? We shall respond to this question by monitoring an

imaginary dialogue between a determinist (*D*) and an anti-determinist (*AD*). The dialogue is ongoing; we shall sample it somewhere after the beginning and before the end.

AD: I must agree with you that sometimes desires are difficult to overcome and that what has happened in childhood has helped to form my present character. I have already agreed to the fact that my living in this society in this century has much to do with my behavior; and, as you hinted, on how I think. In fact let's explore how or why we think as we do a little further. Tell me again, why are *you* a determinist? Give me your reasons.

D: I have been telling you for the past hour. You have just agreed with some of my reasons.

AD: I know. You have been saying that you believe in determinism because the evidence supports such an hypothesis.

D: That is precisely what I am saying. I admit, of course, that I cannot prove that every event is determined, just as I cannot prove that nature is uniform. But I can say that the events which come to my attention have causes that can either actually or in principle be ascertained.

AD: And you are applying the principle, "Every event is determined," to events, which occur in our minds, that is, to our wishes, impulses, decisions, and so forth?

D: I certainly am.

AD: Does the principle apply to our reasoning?

D: Most reasons, a psychoanalyst can tell you, are rationalizations.

AD: Are your reasons for believing in determinism rationalizations?

D: We surely don't need to go over that again. I have told you that the evidence points toward determinism.

AD: It seems to me, then, that you are in an actual dilemma. Let me try to state it: if, on the one hand, your reasons for being a determinist are determined, you cannot appeal to any standards of truth or validity that are not themselves determined; but, if on the other hand, you do insist that you are a determinist because all the evidence points toward determinism and if you also insist that the canons of validity which you use in weighing this evidence are not determined (but are freely chosen and rationally assented to), you have deserted your position and are not a determinist after all. I conclude from this that either you cannot argue reasonably for your position or you are not a determinist.

D: Even if I were to grant that your play on words is either significant or correct, you have given no reason why a determinist cannot recognize what is true or false: he can be caused to believe the truth and to perceive error. There is no contradiction in assuming this.

AD: Perhaps you are right. Now, I think you are saying something like this: "All who believe in determinism are caused to believe what is true" may be a true statement. Do you agree?

D: Yes.

AD: How about this sentence: "All who believe in indeterminism are caused to believe what is false (i.e., in so far as they are indeterminists)." May it be equally true?

D: I suppose so.

AD: But indeterminists believe that both sentences are false, do they not?

D: Of course they do, but they have not weighed the evidence correctly.

AD: We are talking past each other, but I'll try again: according to the determinist thesis, there can be no "correct weighing" of evidence among philosophical opponents because each is determined to hold precisely the belief he does. If one opponent were to change his mind—and it could be either one—all we can properly conclude is that the exchange of opinions "caused" the change. The whole process is analogous to the determinist's admission that punishment of a criminal is compatible with his hypothesis. If the criminal's behavior is changed for the better it is not because he has "seen the light" and has freely chosen to do better: rather, the punishment is merely part of the total causative process which made him bad, then better. The same can be said about any change resulting from a presumably "rational" argument between a determinist and an indeterminist.

Here we leave the dialogue with the suspicion that the opponents will begin to repeat their arguments. We also leave with the conviction that the anti-determinist has been favored: he has been allowed "prime" time. His arguments will hardly convince the determinist, however, unless the latter shifts his attention from the traditional concern over ethical choices and acts and concentrates his attention on the reliability of his own assertions. For the anti-determinist's arguments finally to make sense to any of us, we must assume that our own thought, not only the thought of our opponent, can be and must be called into question if the determinist hypothesis is taken seriously. We cannot, of course, hope to settle the issues here, nor has it been our intention to do so; we are simply considering the consequences of determinism for the autonomy of human reason. This is why it is to our interest to cast a glance (all too briefly) at the great rationalists, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, who had no qualms (or few, at least) about the autonomous quality of reason.

Gilson and Langan express the attitude which a rationalist *ought to have toward freedom* when they say: "Freedom, for the rationalist, can mean only one thing: capacity to fulfill the conditions of rational intelligibility. These are summed up in the famous formula for the criteria of truth: clarity and distinctness."¹ The authors here are actually referring to God's freedom in Spinoza's system, but Spinoza himself is the

rationalist we are interested in. He is, of course, commonly believed to be prominent among philosophical determinists; for instance, George Santayana, in his introduction to Spinoza's system, remarks: "He was a fatalist, in the sense that he regarded everything that happens as perfectly inevitable, pre-ordained, and predictable."² This is also a "perfectly" correct summary of Spinoza's ruthlessly logical interpretation of nature as dependent (*natura naturata*) and of man as a finite mode of being; yet, his metaphysics also allows for the human intellect to participate in the divine intellect in so far as the divine intellect constitutes the essence of the human mind (see Prop. XL in Pt. II of the *Ethics*). This affinity between the human mind and the divine intellect also provides the metaphysical basis for the pursuit of enlightenment (or blessedness) for which Spinoza shows so much fondness. Men are encouraged to control their passions through the exercise of reason; this is what the *tractatus de intellectus emendatione* is all about; and in this magnificent treatise, Spinoza experiences no hesitation in ascribing to man the freedom of choice requisite to the achievement of the state of happiness that he envisions. Men can and ought to accustom themselves to thinking clearly and calmly.

The other rationalists, Descartes and Leibniz, certainly endorse the criteria of clarity and distinctness. Curiously enough, however, Descartes finds that the mind is "intrinsically" free because it can suppose that which is dubitable to be non-existent. (This idea shows up in the *Principles*, but is sufficiently stated in his synopsis of the second of his *Meditations*.) Moreover, his well-known bifurcation of mind and body allows him to endow mind with a freedom that the laws of nature exclude from the realm of material bodies. But for our purposes it is the freedom which Descartes imputes to thinking that is significant: men can weigh evidence, probe into matters logically, reason hypothetically, etc.

Leibniz, for his part, also places great emphasis upon reason. Mathematics appears to be generated by the principle of identity and the contingent world made understandable by the principle of sufficient reason. All too often, however, any given thinker may have to concede certain things because of his metaphysical commitments. This is true of Leibniz and it is certainly the case with the other rationalists considered here. The principle of pre-established harmony might be presumed to rule out all possibility of freedom; however, when we consider that this principle is assumed to provide for the uniqueness of each windowless monad we can agree with Tsanoff when he says that for Leibniz, "Each monad is a unique expression of the universe and so in a real sense it is free and self-determined."³ But there are three kinds or levels of these monads: unconscious, conscious, and rational. Referring to the third-level of monads, Tsanoff takes note in his own way of the relationship which we

have presumed to hold between rationality and freedom: "The intelligent will is free of any external determination. . . . Moral freedom is thus relative to self-understanding and rationality in conduct."⁴ Leibniz, however, in a letter to Coste in 1707, without referring to his grand metaphysical designs, merely shows that a decision—in this case to go out or remain at home—is contingent (not necessary) because when we take into account all the determining antecedents: "motives, perceptions, dispositions, impressions, passions, inclinations," a proposition stating the opposite of the decision does not involve a contradiction. Although noting that the liberty of decision is exempt from logical necessity, he goes on to say that "it cannot be exempted from determination and certainty."⁵

Even with this Leibnizian disclaimer of freedom, it can be said (or has been said as I have indicated) that the rationalists, precisely in as far as they stress the rational powers of the mind, tend to stress its freedom. In fact they have been brought into this discussion as test cases; we have been saying in effect that if anyone attends to the human understanding, it will be apparent that if there is no *unique* freedom to weigh, judge, remain in doubt, or come to well-supported conclusions, then there are no truly rational powers of the mind. That the rationalists have presupposed this freedom, however greatly their metaphysics may have focused their attention elsewhere, is quite evident in each case: Descartes gives his "rules for the direction of the mind," Spinoza expects a "correction of the understanding" if his principles are followed, and Leibniz is indefatigable in offering his pointers for improving thought, first in logic, then in mathematics, science, and theology.

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Regardless of what the rationalists thought about freedom or irrespective of their attitude about the powers of reason and the kinship of the human mind with the mind of God, our age has "moved on." It may no longer be possible for us to believe that logical rules are anything but mere conventions and that the dilemma of the determinist proposed in the second section of this paper is anything more than a play on words. For is it not certain that if logic is independent of fact, no mere paradox or dilemma can make any difference to the realm of fact? If we are determined (caused) to think as we do, this is the end of the matter.

But is this the end of the matter? We are still tainted enough by rationalism not to go to experience to see if we can find a round square. In fact, we usually shrug off incongruities of this kind by saying that squares are not circles by *definition*, as if this somehow explains why nature, with its approximations to circles and squares, never offers us an

approximately round square. Also we are not likely to "offend" logical rules by deliberately committing errors, especially if we are trying to present an argument. Moreover, I do not believe that most of those who argue the determinist thesis are trying to include their own ideas within the scope of determinism. They may well admit that they have been preformed by their genes and shaped by their society (as we all do), but they indeed seem to be trying to offer evidence for their beliefs. When for example, Mortiz Schlick tells us in his *Problems of Ethics* that the free will problem has arisen because of confusion over the meaning of terms such as "compulsion," "necessity," or "causality," he is telling us the truth as he sees it. It is doubtful that he would admit that he was caused to make the statements he did, rather than their opposites. Marie Collins Swabey is speaking to the same point when she says:

... curiously enough, most of the naturalists who reduce thought to existential terms neglect to apply their discovery to their own thinking, but grandly, if inconsistently, make an exception in their own favor. (The fact is that they see all too well that, if their story were true, and if all men, including themselves, were made to believe as they do by blind compulsions of fact, their thinking would not give us any dependable information.)⁶

If Swabey's "naturalists" see, as well as she claims, the paradoxical drift of their own thinking, then the respect for reason, if not honesty, is still with us. We may have lost the faith that once was strong, namely, that men can understand the very essence of the world, or that the human mind can reflect the creative reason responsible for the (rational) structure of the world. In short, we may have discovered (wisely perhaps?) that we can do without an explicit metaphysics; but this is hardly sufficient cause to denounce the very intelligence which may have warned us that we are still too ignorant to do creditable metaphysics.

Therefore, we can respect our reason without, say, redoing Spinoza. To respect reason is to endow it with a freedom *sui generis*; we may have to stop here without explaining why or how anything can be as free as reason, even while dark suspicions lurk within that our thinking is conditioned by physical, psychic, sociocultural—or whatever forces. When we look away from these suspicions, however, we see that men, despite their ontological backwardness, know a great deal: the vast encyclopedia of commonsense wisdom and scientific knowledge should be sufficient to stifle some of our doubts. This knowledge would have been impossible had not the human mind been free in the way this discussion has indicated.

NOTES

¹ Etienne Gilson and Thomas Langan, *Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Kant* (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 131.

² *Spinoza's Ethics and 'De Intellectus Emendatione,'* in Everyman's Library, trans. A. Boyle (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1910), p. xvii. In the same context Santayana adds: "Freedom [for Spinoza] lay not in indetermination of character, or freedom to have chosen anything else as readily as what one has actually chosen, but rather in efficiency of character, and liberty to carry out one's innate choice." *Ibid.*

³ Radoslav A. Tsanoff, *The Great Philosophers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), p. 335.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

⁵ *Leibniz Selections*, edited by Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), pp. 481-482.

⁶ *Logic and Nature*, 2nd edition (New York: New York University Press, 1955), p. 43.

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