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DETERMINISM AND RESPONSIBILITY

UNLESS one has been recently disgusted by a surfeit of discussion on this sometimes barren topic, a religious thinker will almost invariably be carried away into a heated argument. This is better than to denominate the question barren, for such an attitude is agnostic, and to be disgusted is merely to be exhausted. Every Christian must face this problem squarely, and especially must the Calvinist so do, since he believes that much of the learned disrespect of Christianity is owing to the loose thinking of Catholics and Arminians.

Yet for fear someone may expect too much from a paper with such a comprehensive title, it is necessary strictly to state the scope of this article. First of all it is not a discussion of the freedom of the will such as is found in Jonathan Edwards' well-known work. The arguments of that great man concern many details which, however important and interesting, may be omitted from the present subject. Naturally there is some overlapping but the direction of search is different. The investigation of innumerable intricacies runs the risk of losing all sense of proportion, of becoming entangled in a puzzling maze and so requires an exceptionally great mind such as Edwards' was. The direction of search here, on the contrary, will be away from intricacies toward very general outlines and thus must run the risk of being superficial. Nevertheless it has seemed worth the risk. Now to state exactly the scope of the matter: Recently in books and magazines¹ of varying intellectual value there have appeared, in defence of historic Christianity as opposed to modern wanderings, attacks on "mechanistic psychology," "determinism in all its forms," and other phrases of similar import. This writer fears that however much one may hold to the cardinal points of orthodoxy, it is not always clear which philosophic theories are or are not consistent with such orthodoxy. One would think that only a shallow magazine would indiscriminately condemn all forms of determinism; there might be more excuse for an attack on mechanistic

¹ For example, *The Defender*, which is aggressively but not very profoundly fundamental, and *Christian Faith and Life*, an equally aggressive magazine but somewhat more scholarly. The editor of the latter, Harold Paul Sloan, who has done notable practical work in his own denomination, frequently attacks the Calvinistic position. See also the confusion resulting on a non-Calvinistic view in the recent book by J. Paterson Smyth, *Myself and Other Problems*. The confusion is acute in the chapter, "Love of God and Doctrine of Hell."

psychology. The aim of this article is, then, to show that determinism is consistent with responsibility, indeed responsibility requires determinism.

The arguments on both sides are fairly well known. They so lack originality as to discourage new attempts, including this one. The determinist position is stated as well as anywhere in an article by George Stuart Fullerton, entitled "Freedom and Free Will."¹ His aim was to show that on the basis of indeterminism moral conduct in general, in so far as free or indeterminate, would lose all ethical value. The indeterminist holds that certain actions are not adequately explained, i.e. determined by preceding causes. Then, if benevolence for example is a free action, it is not determined by a benevolent personality but happens causelessly. If the will were free absolutely, then a knowledge of one's own respectable character in the past brings neither hope nor consolation. Ordinarily we consider character a determining factor, and a moral man does not become immoral except for some other determining factor. But free will allows a man to become a criminal for no reason at all. Fullerton's illustration was little Tommy who stole his mother's jam. Punishment will not prevent a recurrence of the invasion of the pantry, neither will persuasion of a gentler sort. These can have no determining power on free actions. But on a deterministic theory, punishment, persuasion and praise are all justified. "It seems, then, that Tommy's mother, and his aunts and all his spiritual pastors and masters have for years approached Tommy upon a strictly deterministic basis. They have thought it worth while to talk, and to talk a great deal. They have done what all pedagogues do—they have adjusted means to ends and have looked for results, taking no account of freedom at all."

On the other hand, if there is no responsibility for the free-willist, is there any for the determinist? This paper aims to harmonise determinism and responsibility on the basis of Calvinistic Christianity. And if it has not been done before the reason is that the Calvinists of today are but half-hearted followers of the prince of theologians, John Calvin.

If we must pass by many of the details in discussions on free will, it is all the more needful to avoid embarking on the general subject of theism. Although it is the necessary foundation of the view to be explained, no one could reasonably expect it to be

¹ Published December, 1900, in *Popular Science Monthly*.

treated here, even in brief. We might be permitted to suggest however that one reason, even if only confirmatory, for assuming the being of God is precisely the more unified world which results from applying the conception of sovereignty to such problems as these.

To recall the discussion to the title of the paper and to make the present position more intelligible even if by contrast, one passage from an ancient author relative to sovereignty and omnipotence serves admirably well. Plato, in the second book of the Republic, says, "God, inasmuch as he is good, cannot be the cause of all things. . . . On the contrary, he is the author of only a small part of human affairs; of the larger part he is not the author: for our evil things far outnumber our good things: and the good things we must ascribe to no other than God, while we must seek elsewhere, and not in him, the causes of the evil things."¹ And as Plato here denies God's omnipotence, denies that He is the first cause of all, so Aristotle denies His omniscience.

It might now be well to turn from antiquity to some contemporary literature, not because the more recent is either better or more original than the old but because these are the living defenders of what we attack.

Dr. Arthur Holmes' *The Mind of St. Paul* provides a typical paragraph. This work is partly a description of Paul's emotional nature, partly a criticism of various psychological explanations of Paul's conversion. Theories of the subconscious or unconscious and theories of multiple personality occupy a good portion of the chapters. While the book as a whole does not bear on the present subject, Dr. Holmes feels called upon briefly to mention freedom and responsibility. The paragraph presents a very familiar view.

"St. Paul's system of morality avoids many pitfalls of man-made systems of ethics, but it does not eliminate one of the great problems involved in all morality and religion. This is the problem of freedom, the power of man to choose anything whatsoever. Such a liberty has been denied by predestinarian theologians and mechanistic scientists. Both contend that man's seeming freedom is illusory. Neither theory is based upon observed facts, but deduced from previous theories—the first, from the absolute sovereignty of an omnipotent God, the second from the assumed power of inductive science to predict the occurrence of future events. On the other hand, the common sense of

¹ p. 379 (Davies and Vaughan's translation).

mankind, bent on preserving the moral responsibility of men, has always favoured at least a freedom to choose between good and bad on man's part. St. Paul went thus far and no farther. He never changed from his position in this matter from the doctrine of the Pharisees (Rom. ix. 14-18, 23). He seems clearly enough to insist upon the sovereignty of God and His perfect freedom to mould men as He will. Yet, at the same time men appear free to choose both ends and means, and the Evangelist exhorts men and women to do so without a single hint that they are unable to make such choices. In all probability he would have indignantly denied the modern doctrine of determinism or physical necessity."¹

Before quoting a second contemporary, it is well to note and emphasise that the reason—and has anyone found any other really basic reason?—for introducing the concept of freedom, either in its most extreme form of power of contrary choice or in some more modified form, is to hold man morally responsible. Could it be shown that man's responsibility does not necessarily depend upon freedom, theology would be freed from an annoying problem. Well can we imagine the groanings which cannot be uttered if generations of young theologues were to be summoned before us to describe the tortures they endured in trying to reconcile God's omniscience with free will. The denomination to which the writer is attached does not believe in free will. It substitutes the concept of free agency, meaning that a man is a free moral agent when he acts in conformity to his own nature. Even so, that denomination has stated² that the reconciliation of man's free agency and God's sovereignty is an inscrutable mystery. Rather the mystery is—recognising that God is the ultimate cause of the man's nature—how the Calvinistic solution could have been so long overlooked.

But before making the solution explicit, permit a final word from the opponents. Miss Harkness, Professor of Philosophy in Elmira College, in *Conflict in Religious Thought*, offers the following :

“Throughout the whole history of philosophy and theology people have wrangled over the question of free will. In general, the idealistic philosophies have asserted that the human spirit must be in some sense free, while materialistic philosophies have

¹ pp. 255-256.

² In the *Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith* of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1902; cf. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, pp. 251-252; also the four questions A. H. Strong cannot answer, *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 366.

denied this freedom. Theology has clung tenaciously to the belief that man is a 'free moral agent' while at the same time often asserting a doctrine of predestination which, taken at its face value, would rigidly circumscribe man's acts. The problem, though complex, is too fundamental to be dodged.

"We have seen that the possibility of moral or immoral action depends upon the power of choice. If all one's acts are set and predetermined (either by the structure of the material world or by the will of God) in such fashion that it is impossible to act other than one does, quite obviously freedom disappears. With the power of voluntary choice goes moral responsibility. One cannot consciously choose to be good, nor choose to seek after God, unless he has the power to choose not to do so. No moral quality attaches to my failure to steal the million dollars that is outside my reach, but stealing becomes a moral question with me when I have to decide whether to tell the store clerk he has given me too much change. Likewise if I am 'foreordained' to be saved or damned there is not much use of my doing anything about my fate. If I have no freedom, I am not responsible for my acts.

"Theological determinism, or predestination, is a cardinal doctrine of Mohammedanism. Islam means 'submission' (to the will of Allah) and a Moslem is 'one who submits'—to the fatalistic decrees of an arbitrary deity. Christian theology in its earlier forms regarded God as equally peremptory (though more ethical) in His decrees. Through the influence of illustrious Christian theologians, notably Paul, Augustine and Calvin, the doctrine of predestination has profoundly influenced Christian thinking. While God's omnipotence has thus been emphasised, God's freedom has been exalted at the expense of man's, and the most inhuman acts have been glossed over as arising from the will of God. But happily the doctrine of predestination is disappearing, at least in its application to evils that are obviously preventable.

"Some still hold that when the typhoid victim dies from lack of proper sanitation, it happened because it was 'to be.' There is a good deal of illogical comfort in such a view. But not many, even of the most rigorous of Calvinists, would now say that if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it is the will of God that he should do so!"¹

While forced to smile a bit as authors permit their animosities to give rise to disparaging circumlocutions instead of appropriate

¹ pp. 233-234.

argument, one must confess to being a little irritated at insinuating. Whether absolute predestination is happily being forgotten or not is quite irrelevant. The present question is, can predestination and determinism be reconciled with and made the basis of moral distinctions and human responsibility. Miss Harkness thinks not.

First of all, she claims moral action requires choice and choice requires the ability to have done otherwise. This is the first thing to be denied. Choice is that mental act, that deliberate volition—I do not intend a comprehensive definition—which initiates a human action. The ability to have chosen otherwise is an irrelevant consideration¹ and has no place in the definition. It is still a deliberate volition even if it could not have been different. True we are not always conscious of our limitation. Those who appeal to the consciousness of freedom and consider that such appeal closes the issue rely on cherry or apple pie as illustrations. If illustrations be necessary we can refer to Luther's sentiments: "Here I stand, so help me God, I can do no other." The more important the decision, the less power of contrary choice we feel. And I venture to suppose that Luther's is a fairly common experience with serious, responsible persons.

But is there nothing in Kant's dictum, If I ought, I can? As stated by Kant and the Catholics it leads immediately to salvation by works. The motive which prompted this incorrect principle can, however, be better stated and so save what of truth it contains. If all ought, at least one can. If all ought to be honest, then some can and are. If all ought perfectly to satisfy divine justice, at least One has done so. At any rate we must remember that choice must be defined as a psychological function, distinct from desire or judgment for example, and nowhere in the definition can be found a place for the power to have chosen differently.

Likewise, Miss Harkness states, "if I am foreordained to be saved or damned there is not much use of my doing anything about my fate." It is strange that anyone but a novice should use this so-called "lazy argument" after the Stoics so long ago showed its fallaciousness. It is of use to do something precisely because it is the means to something else. The Mohammedan or fatalistic idea that the end is fixed independently of the means is but a

¹ All that is required to define choice or volition is that necessary and sufficient combination of factors which distinguishes it from other psychological functions. The statement of Charles Hodge, *op. cit.* p. 285, will then be seen to be an invalid inference, for a necessary volition is as much a volition as an unnecessary one.

caricature of Calvinism sometimes maliciously used. The end is foreordained to arrive by means of the means, and to attain the end is the value of the means. But at any rate she well illustrates that the motive for asserting man's freedom is responsibility.

After relegating theological determinism to a benighted past, Miss Harkness dismisses mechanical or scientific determinism in a footnote on the quantum theory. This is mentioned here solely to point out that Calvinistic determinism may or may not be mechanical. The rationality of the mechanical ideal is aside from the present purpose. Theological determinism neither requires nor excludes it. All one needs to maintain is that every event is determined to occur as it does and cannot be otherwise. God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

The author last quoted seems in a previous page to have missed the main point. Discussing the question, Is God limited? she concludes that omnipotence is not inconsistent with freedom. God may freely limit Himself and omnipotently create persons endowed with free wills. This overlooks one essential factor, viz. God's omniscience. If God knows what will happen, what He knows will happen will happen and nothing else. Calvinists believe God knows what will happen because He ordained it so. But aside from this, foreknowledge indicates that the future is certain. And if it is not God who made the future certain, we must return to the dualism of Plato. But let it pass; if there be an omniscient God, the future is certain. The professor in Elmira College overlooked the decisive factor.

Now then, if every event is certain, can man be responsible for deeds he could not have escaped doing? Or does determinism make good men "pious little automata" as Miss Harkness says?¹ Again neglecting to notice what is substituted for rational argument, one may very justly reply, it all depends on what is meant by automata, or more precisely, what responsibility means.

It seems strange that works on theology usually make no very energetic attempt to define responsibility. But if it is of such importance, one ought not to omit making it as precise as possible. Yet this attempt is noticeably lacking among determinists and free willists alike. Not all true statements are definitional. The Pythagorean theorem states a truth respecting a right triangle but it is not a definition of one. Now Charles Hodge makes certain statements about responsibility, but it is not clear whether

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 206.

he intended them as definitions or merely true statements. For example, "We are responsible for our feelings because they are right or wrong in their own nature."¹ In the next paragraph he makes human nature the ground of responsibility. The following looks more like a definition: "Wherever reason and the power of self-determination or spontaneity are combined in an agent, he is free and responsible for his outward acts and for his volitions."²

Definition is no easy task, and an incorrect one may deceive us frightfully. The caution of him who would not admit two plus two equals four until he knew how the admission was to be used is nothing short of exemplary. Yet those who have criticised the position to be offered at most say that the conception of responsibility involved is incomplete or restricted. Perhaps they are right, all that is needed is that the characteristics mentioned are essential elements of the definition. Let us call a man responsible, then, when he may be justly rewarded or punished for his deeds. That is, the man must be answerable to someone, to God, for responsibility implies a superior authority who punishes or rewards. Now since in theology the crux of the matter is in the eternal punishment of some sinners, we may disregard other elements in the definition and emphasise that by calling a man responsible we mean he may be justly punished by God. For this definitional truth is the key to the explanation of why a man is responsible for the act God determined him to do.

More than one person, with caution born of experience, have replied at this point, that although they did not see the trap they could always escape the disagreeable Calvinistic conclusions by clinging to the saving adverb "justly." This of course is just what is desired. For whether the adverb is an escape from Calvinism or the very essence of Calvinism itself depends on the meaning of justice. For by the echoes of Plato's Republic we cannot continue until we have seized Justice herself.

This leads to an illustration in the writing of Leibniz, Descartes and Calvin. Leibniz held that this was the best of all possible worlds, thus provoking the remark he must have been a pessimist. He had said that God might have chosen any one of a number of possible worlds, each more or less good, but as a matter of fact God chose the best of them. He expressly denies that this

¹ Vol. II, p. 275, repeated on p. 304.

² *Ibid.*, p. 286. See also Princeton *Essays* (1st series), on *Power of Contrary Choice*, *passim*.

world is best because God chose it. This latter proposition, the world is good because God chose it, was Descartes' opinion.

It is at this point we must refer to and take issue with Jonathan Edwards. While he tries to avoid placing God under commands, he still seems to imply the Platonic dualism by representing God as influenced by inducements.¹ Later, when he comes to our present subject, he calls the question which divided Descartes and Leibniz, absurdity and nonsense.²

John Calvin was not of the same opinion. He anticipated Descartes' position, and in the *Institutes* has given the key to the solution :

"In the first place they inquire, by what right the Lord is angry with His creatures who had not provoked Him by any previous offence ; for that to devote to destruction whom He pleases is more like the caprice of a tyrant than the lawful sentence of a judge ; that men have reason, therefore, to expostulate with God, if they are predestinated to eternal death without any demerit of their own, merely by His sovereign will. If such thoughts ever enter the minds of pious men, they will be sufficiently enabled to break their violence by this one consideration, how exceedingly presumptuous it is only to inquire into the causes of the Divine will ; which is in fact, and is justly entitled to be, the cause of every thing that exists. For if it has any cause, then there must be something antecedent, on which it depends ; which it is impious to suppose. For the will of God is the highest rule of justice ; so that what He wills must be considered just, for this very reason, because He wills it. When it is inquired, therefore, why the Lord did so, the answer must be, because He would. But if you go further, and ask why He so determined, you are in search of something greater and higher than the will of God, which can never be found."³

God is Sovereign ; whatever He does is just, for this very reason, because He does it. If He punishes a man, the man is punished justly and hence the man is responsible. This answers the form of argument which runs : whatever God does is just, eternal punishment is not just, therefore God does not so punish. If the objector mean he has received a special revelation that there is no eternal punishment, we cannot deal with him here. If, however, he is not laying claim to a special revelation of future history, but to some philosophic principle which is intended to show that

¹ *Freedom of Will*, I, v.

² *Ibid.*, IV, viii.

³ III, xxiii, 2.

eternal punishment is unjust, the distinction between our positions becomes immediately obvious. Calvin has rejected that view of the universe which makes a law, whether of justice or of evolution, instead of the law-giver supreme. Such a view is the Platonic dualism which posits a World of Ideas superior to the Artificer.¹ God in such a system is finite or limited, bound to follow or obey the pattern. But those who proclaim the Sovereignty of God determine what justice is by observing what God actually does. Whatever God does is just. What He commands men to do or not to do is similarly just or unjust.

This much is sufficient for our solution. Granted many other things remain to be said. The necessity of means or secondary, proximate causes might be further emphasised, sin as the judicial ground of divine punishment, because God so determined it should be, might be mentioned; further appendages and replies to objections could be tacked on. Only one need be examined. Does the view here proposed make God the Author of sin? Why the learned divines who formulated the various creeds so uniformly permitted such a metaphorical expression² to becloud the issue is a puzzle. This view most certainly makes God the First and Ultimate Cause of everything. But very slight reflection on the definition of responsibility and its implication of a superior authority shows that God is not responsible for sin.

It follows from this that determinism is consistent with responsibility and that the concept of freedom which was introduced only to guarantee responsibility is useless. Of course man is still a "free agent" for that merely means, as Hodge³ says, that man has the power to make a decision. It is difficult to understand then, why so much effort should be wasted⁴ in the attempt to make the power of deciding consistent with the certainty of deciding. If there be any mystery about it, as the Brief Statement says, it is one of the theologian's own choosing. For God both gives the power and determines how it shall be used. God is Sovereign.

It seems to me that a great many objections to specific Christian doctrines, objections to the propitiatory atonement or

¹ Granted that the Neo-Platonists said Plato did not mean this. But Plato's texts are open to everyone's examination, especially the *Euthyphro*. Attention is called to the keen article of E. Gottlieb, "Zum Problem des Euthyphron," in the *Archiv. für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1926.

² Edwards is of the same opinion, *op. cit.*, IV, ix.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 293.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

the Incarnation, arise from a non-Christian view of God's nature. The modernists object to a vicarious sacrifice because they do not think God is that sort of a person. Theirs is not the God of the early Christians. And my sincere conviction is that if we are to retain the *Satisfactio*, if we are to promulgate a consistent Christianity, we must, among other things, reject and combat the semi-arminianism prevailing in so-called Calvinistic churches, and return to predestination, the perseverance of the saints, the ninth chapter of Romans, and Paul's best interpreter, John Calvin.

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