

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Paradox of Liberty.

DR. INGE has said somewhere that the freedom of the will is a fact that moralists cannot afford to forget nor metaphysicians to remember. The supposed opposition between ethics and metaphysics on the question of determinism and free-will is perhaps the chief crux of philosophy. Sir David Ross, the Aristotelian scholar and Provost of Oriel, has affirmed with regard to the problem of free-will that all the metaphysical considerations seem to point one way, viz., to determinism, and all the ethical considerations seem to point the other way, viz., to free-will, thus presenting the philosopher with an *impasse*.

When we are thinking metaphysically, it seems obvious that every event must be determined by a previous event, which in turn was determined by a previous event, according to a universal law of cause and effect. We are thus confronted by a chain of causation in which all events, including human actions, are the effects of causes and determined by those causes. It is true that a human being chooses to act in a certain way; but his choice is itself an event, and as such is determined by some cause. Human conduct, therefore, cannot be excluded from the general law of determinism which seems to rule out any real freedom of choice.

When we are thinking ethically, however, we perceive that duty implies freedom. As Kant put it: "I ought" implies "I can." According to Kant there is no sense in saying that a man ought to do such and such an act unless he is free to choose whether he will do that act or not. The facts of moral responsibility, merit and guilt appear to rest upon freedom of choice between alternative courses of action, and that this choice is not already predetermined by past events. Evangelism, in particular, seems to presuppose freedom of choice in the hearer. When the preacher extends the Gospel invitation to men and women, he takes it for granted that they are free agents, free to accept or reject the invitation.

From the two different points of view, therefore, the metaphysical and the ethical, the doctrines of determinism and free-will seem equally true; and yet determinism and free-will have usually been treated by philosophers as mutually exclusive opposites. It is not, however, in the nature of truth to be divided against itself. It is the purpose of this article to try to show that determinism of a certain kind is not only compatible with liberty, but a necessary condition of it.

This truth can be most clearly seen in the realm of thought. We frequently use the expression "freedom of thought" without enquiring very carefully what we mean by it. Do we mean that a man is free to choose what he will think? Surely not. If a man is to think at all, he must be guided by the facts, so far as he can ascertain them, and by the laws of logic. Nothing is more free than true thought, and yet nothing is more definitely "determined." When thinkers say, as they often do, "the evidence *compels* me to draw this conclusion," or "I am *forced* to come to this judgement," they are stating what is literally the case, yet they are not conscious of being deprived of "freedom of thought." The fact is, we are never more free in our thinking than when our thinking is most strictly determined by our apprehension of the facts and the laws of logic. Our thinking achieves its fullest liberty in the apprehension of real facts and the real relations between them; yet this apprehension is nothing else but surrender to the compulsion of Truth. When I perceive that two and two make four, I am a free agent, and yet I am also under compulsion, for I cannot think otherwise. The facts compel me to think as I do.

True liberty in thought, therefore, is not only compatible with determinism, but is necessarily conditioned by it. Thought is free only as it is compelled by objective truth and by the principles of reason. The true free-thinker is "determined.;" and by "determined" we do not mean "self-determined." A man whose thought was determined by himself, by his character, prejudices, passions, wishes and whims, would be the least entitled to be regarded as a free-thinker, or indeed, as a thinker at all. A thinker is free only in so far as he is a captive to Truth; that is, when this thought is guided and determined by a Power not himself, objective and inexorable in its demands. This Power is not an alien Power, since It is rational as man is rational. It is this affinity between the compelling power and the compelled mind which robs the compulsion of its sting and gives to the thinker the feeling of liberty and victory.

If determinism is a necessary condition of liberty in the realm of thought, this must be true also in the realm of action, since free human action in the full sense must be rational, i.e., directed *freely* by reason. Other factors no doubt enter in, such as volition and conation, but reason must be the basis of all action which has the right to be called free. The motive power which moves a truly free agent to do what reason tells him to be right is the love of Goodness which like a magnet draws the free heart towards itself. The heart which is held back by its own evil lusts and passions is not free at all. True liberty in human conduct

lies in servitude to that Power, not ourselves, which in the realm of thought is Truth, in the realm of behaviour Goodness, and in the realm of art Beauty. We are free moral agents in so far as we are under the compulsion of the Good that we see. Luther was never more free than when he said, "I can do no other." In a sense the stand he took was the result of his free choice: no man compelled him to take it. He was the free and willing captive of Truth. His was no arbitrary action: he was moved to do it by the compelling power of a revelation of the truth.

In action, as in thought, liberty and determinism are not opposed, but are complementary to one another. And again by "determinism" we do not mean "self-determination," but determination "ab extra" by a Power not ourselves, though also not alien to ourselves. A. E. Taylor's dismal doctrine that liberty is self-determination is mercifully not true. Anyone who has looked into his own heart and peered into that dreadful abyss must realise that to be self-determined would be worse than any Fatalism. There is no tyranny so terrible as the tyranny of self. Better to be the plaything of a blind and remorseless Destiny than to be the victim of self. No doubt there are, alas, many people who are self-determined, but they know nothing of freedom, only of licence. To be free is to be determined, not by self, but by that Being Who is Truth, Goodness and Beauty, in Whose likeness we were originally made and Whose image within us has been defaced by sin.

Prof. de Burgh was surely right when he said that the problem of free-will and determinism can only be solved when it is lifted into the realm of religion. The service of God is perfect freedom, and nothing else is.

Make me a captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free.

There is no such thing as freedom in the sense of indeterminism. We are all determined either by our own selfishness and ignorance, in which case we are slaves, or by "a Power, not ourselves, working for righteousness," the God of truth and goodness and love, in which case we enjoy the liberty of the children of God.

But, it will be pointed out, it is possible for a man to pass from the state of being determined by selfishness into the state of being determined by God. Is not this transition effected by the free choice of the individual? The answer depends upon the meaning which we assign to the phrase "free choice." If by "free" we mean "uncaused" then the answer must be "No." An uncaused choice would be an impossibility; and, even if it were possible, it would have no moral significance: it would

be a mere freak of chance. Where then does the cause of the choice lie in a case where a man passes from the state of being determined by selfishness into the state of being determined by God? The only adequate cause is God Himself. As Jesus said: "No man can come unto Me except the Father which sent Me draw him."¹ We may extend to men the Gospel invitation, but only God Himself can bring a man to accept it. As the Bishop of London has written: "The Church cannot convert anybody. It may evangelise; it cannot convert. Only God can do that." (*Has the Church Failed?* Odhams Press Ltd.)

It may be objected that freedom is compatible with self-determination, if the latter is understood as the determination of a man by his "higher self." F. H. Cleobury, for instance, in his very interesting and suggestive book, *God, Man, and the Absolute*, while accepting the position that man can be free only as he is determined by the Absolute, goes on to identify determination by the Absolute with self-determination, on the ground that man's "higher self," by which he means his "real" self, is identical with the Absolute.

This doctrine is indefensible for several reasons. (1) The theory of "two selves," a higher and lower self, is untenable. The self is a unity, an integral whole. It is unjustifiable to isolate the divine element in human nature, so to speak, in a water-tight compartment, and call it the "real self." The self of a rational man is one integral whole, embracing all that he is. (2.) In the unregenerate man this self is corrupted by sin through and through. The divine element remains, but even this "image of God" within him has been defaced and spoiled. So that every action of the unregenerate man is sinful, precisely because it is self-determined. Even if he does what is *right*, his action is not *good* (to use the useful distinction expounded by Ross in *The Right and the Good*), because his motive is tainted and impure. In this sense we can accept Augustine's dictum that even the apparent virtues of the pagans are really sins. Self-determination must be bondage to sin. (3) Even in the regenerate man, the sinfulness of the self is not wholly eliminated. It has been conquered, and it is progressively diminished, but rarely, if ever, is it entirely removed in this life. So that even for the converted man freedom must be, not self-determination, but determination by God. (4.) Even when the self becomes perfect, as the saints in heaven are perfect, the self still cannot be identified with God. The essence of religion is the worship of God and fellowship with Him; but these would be impossible if the self were identical with Him. Complete identity would be as destructive of the possibility of worship and fellowship as would

¹ John vi. 44.

complete dissimilarity. There is an affinity between man and God, but affinity, or similarity, is, as Dr. Cleobury himself explains, a compound of identity and difference. (p.41.) Man will always be different from God as well as like Him.

Dr. Cleobury quaintly follows up his claim to be identical, in his "real self," with the Absolute, by praising the virtue of humility! But, we may well ask, why should a man be humble, if he is, in his "real ego," identical with the Absolute? Humble before *what* or *whom*? If humility is a virtue, it must, as Dr. Cleobury well says, be based upon truth. But what is this truth? Surely it is threefold: (a) Man is one self, not two selves. (b) Man, although made in God's image, is essentially lower than God. (c) Man's goodness is not the work of man, but of God. If we accept humility as a virtue, based on truth, then we cannot believe either that human goodness and liberty are the result of man's self-determination or that the self is identical with God.

The human soul is a battle-ground where two opposing forces, God and the fallen, sinful self, contend for mastery. The moral struggle arises when self fights against God, as Jacob wrestled with the Divine visitant. Man's only true victory lies in defeat; he finds his liberty only as he surrenders to God. The converted man is the convinced man, and to be convinced means literally to be conquered.² A conviction is not so much something we lay hold upon, as something that lays hold upon us. Similarly goodness is not our achievement, but God's gift to the surrendered soul. We are saved not by our works, but by the electing grace of God. Our own contribution to our salvation is not action, but cessation, to stop resisting, to cease fighting against God, to yield, to surrender. "By grace have ye been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, that no man should glory." (Eph. ii., 8-9). When we are saved, our works henceforth are free, i.e., no longer "self-determined," but "God-determined."

Every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,
And every thought of holiness,
Are His alone.

A. W. ARGYLE.

² Cf. Wheeler Robinson, *Baptist Principles*, p. 19.