

The Problem of Freewill.

THE subject to be considered—in certain of its aspects—in this article may be justly described as one of the perennial, as it is one of the most important problems of human thought. It is a problem that has engaged the attention, and called forth the dialectical powers, of some of the world's greatest thinkers—one that has often provoked long and bitter controversy (especially in theology) and concerning which much has been written, chiefly from the opposed standpoints of Determinism and Libertarianism. Indeed, the literature of the subject is extensive and voluminous enough to suggest that it is both impossible and unnecessary to add to it. Through centuries of speculation the question of Freewill has been considered by men of almost every school and type of thought—by moralists and theologians, by psychologists and metaphysicians—so much so indeed that one recent writer asserts, with pardonable exaggeration, that “the history of the problem of the will is almost the history of philosophy” itself.¹ It cannot, of course, be said that any generally accepted or completely satisfactory solution of this vexed problem has been propounded. On the contrary, there seems to be no subject of philosophic and religious import upon which competent thinkers have differed so much as upon this one. Ever since the rise of the rival philosophies of Stoicism and Epicureanism (the one championing Necessity and the other advocating Freedom), men whose intellectual ability and critical acumen are above suspicion have, like the fallen angels in Milton's great epic, debated the pros and cons of “fixed fate, freewill, fore-knowledge absolute” and have, too, like their angelic predecessors, “found no end, in wandering mazes lost.” Indeed, it is surprising how thinkers of the most diverse schools of thought are to be found occupying common ground on this question; e.g., Christian Theology and Empiricist Scepticism can be one in their attitude to this thorny problem, for Augustine and Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Chalmers, seem to fall into the same ranks as David Hume, J. S. Mill, and Alexander Bain; and again, both Leslie Stephen, the Evolutionist moralist, and T. H. Green, the Idealist metaphysician, claim to be determinists, though of course in different senses. It is, therefore, not to be wondered

¹ A. B. D. Alexander, *Christianity and Ethics*, p. 82.

at that, at the present time, there are some who think it futile to give any further consideration to this admittedly difficult topic—and this, not because they regard the controversy between Determinism and Libertarianism as finally settled, but because they believe the problem so intractable as to be beyond solution. In their opinion, we have not sufficient data from which to deduce any certain conclusions; and any consideration of the problem is, so they assert, bound to lead the investigator into a sort of intellectual *cul-de-sac* from which there is no escape save by way of retreat. Indeed, they believe—as William James puts it in a famous essay—“that the juice has ages ago been pressed out of the freewill controversy, and that no new champion can do more than warm up stale arguments which every one has heard.”² Such people would hardly be enamoured of the suggestion of Milton to the effect that one of the joys of heaven would be found in the opportunities presented by it for full discussion of the mystery of “fate and freewill.”

There are others who also consider it useless further to consider this question—but in their case not because no satisfactory conclusion is possible, but rather because the problem has at last been solved. To them the controversy between Determinism and Libertarianism has been definitely ended by the victory of the former, which victory has been made possible by the rise of modern physical science, with its emphasis upon the notion of “the reign of natural law.” The Hebrew Psalmist sang, with true religious fervour: “The heavens declare the glory of *God*,” but these people say, with the quiet assurance of science: “The heavens declare the glory of *law*.” They have felt justified in assimilating the point of view of psychology to that of the physical sciences, and have applied the Law of Universal Causation to mental states as they express themselves in behaviour, with the result that any freedom worthy of the name is banished from the universe in general and from human life in particular. For such, Meinong, the Austrian philosopher, speaks when he says: “It is not however the deterministic controversy which we propose taking up: in my opinion, at any rate, this is a matter which was concluded long ago; for those who believe in the law of causality cannot logically be indeterminists”;³ and so does Riehl, the German Neo-Kantian, when he boldly asserts that “the sense of freedom is as much

² William James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 145.

³ Meinong, *Psychologisch-ethische Untersuchungen zur Werttheorie*, p. 209. (Quoted by Rudolf Eucken in *Main Currents of Modern Thought*, p. 431.)

an illusion as the impression that the earth moves round the sun." ⁴

Whether or not such dogmatism, which so often characterises the utterances of the champions of what William James so aptly calls "hard-determinism," is justified is a very debatable point which cannot be fully entered into here. Nevertheless, it is not irrelevant to point out that the seemingly barren results of previous discussions of this subject cannot be said to encourage present-day consideration of what appears to be an insoluble problem. As Archibald Alexander says: "The history of the doctrine of the will has been, to a great extent, a history of the dispute about freedom and its opposite, which has an unpleasant notoriety. Anyone who troubles himself or others with this subject is popularly looked upon as the victim of *une idée fixe*, and consigned to the class of zealots who have hopes about the quadrature of the circle." ⁵ The latter part of this assertion may strike some as an exaggeration, but no one can deny that an "unpleasant notoriety" does attach to the subject, and that reports of past controversies about this topic do not make altogether inspiring reading. Oft-times indeed the controversy seems to have been merely a verbal one. Not only has a vague and unsatisfactory terminology given rise to considerable confusion of thought, but to the ordinary unsophisticated man there appears to have been an unnecessary amount of "hair-splitting" and quibbling about words, to which—as David Hume says—"a few intelligible definitions would immediately have put an end." Yet despite the fact that so many past investigations into the Problem of Freewill have ended in apparent barrenness and futility, the subject both demands and deserves the most careful reconsideration.

(a) One reason for this lies in the fact that there are real and important issues at stake, since the problem of the Freedom of the Will ultimately involves the question of moral responsibility; and that is a question to which neither theology, nor ethics, nor metaphysics can, in the long run, be indifferent. Indeed, as Prof. H. Wildon Carr says: "This moral responsibility is the freewill problem." ⁶ Or as Dr. James Welton puts it: "Without freedom there is no responsibility, and therefore no morality. It would be a mockery to show that one kind of life is better than another if man be really an automaton, even though he may be deluded by the belief that he

⁴ Riehl, *Philosophischer Kriticismus*, Vol. II. p. 219. (Quoted by G. T. Ladd, *Philosophy of Conduct*, p. 138.)

⁵ Alexander, *Theories of the Will*, p. 4.

⁶ H. Wildon Carr, *The Freewill Problem*, p. 6.

determines his own conduct.”⁷ Some thinkers, it is true, are inclined to deny that the problem of Freewill is as important as has generally been supposed, although when they do so they refer to the problem in its practical bearings upon the question of moral conduct, rather than in its purely speculative aspects. D. F. Strauss, for example, in his last important work, *Der Alte und der Neue Glaube* (a book which created an even greater sensation than his earlier and more famous *Leben Jesu*), speaking of the problem of the will, says: “The determination of the moral value of human conduct remains untouched by this problem.”⁸ Writing only a year or two later, Henry Sidgwick follows Strauss in regarding the question of Freewill as being of no fundamental importance to the constructive moralist. He denies that “a solution to this metaphysical problem is really important for the regulation of human conduct,” and adds: “Freewill is obviously not included in our common notions of physical and intellectual perfection; and it seems to me also not to be included in the common notions of the excellences of character which we call virtues: the manifestations of courage, temperance and justice do not become less admirable because we can trace their antecedents in a happy balance of inherited dispositions developed by a careful education.”⁹ Others have found themselves in substantial agreement with Sidgwick on this point. Thomas Fowler is one of them. In his *Principles of Morals* he writes: “With Professor Sidgwick’s opinion as to the unimportance of this question in its bearings on the regulation of actual conduct I entirely concur.”¹⁰ Professor A. E. Taylor is another. In his *Elements of Metaphysics* he points out that, owing no doubt to the influence of Kant, there is amongst students of Moral Philosophy a widespread conviction “that ethical science cannot begin its work without some preliminary metaphysical justification of freedom, as a postulate at least, if not as a proved truth.” This point of view he cannot accept. He asserts that the greatest achievements in ethical construction, up to the present time, are to be found in the systems of the great Greek moralists, Plato and Aristotle, “yet the metaphysical problem of freedom, as is well known, is entirely absent from the Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy.” And he sums up his own position on this point in a personal testimony thus: “For my own part I own I cannot rate the practical importance of the metaphysical inquiry

⁷ James Welton, *The Groundwork of Ethics*, pp. 9-10.

⁸ Quoted by Rudolf Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, p. 12.

⁹ H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. 59, 69.

¹⁰ T. Fowler, *Principles of Morals*, Vol. II, p. 331.

into human freedom so high (as those who regard it as a necessary postulate of Moral Science, if not as a proved truth), and am rather of Prof. Sidgwick's opinion as to its superfluousness in strictly ethical investigations."¹¹

Whether or not this point of view can be completely vindicated is to be determined only by a careful analysis of the contents of the moral consciousness, but it cannot be denied that it does seem to be *prima facie* false, since upon the slightest reflection it appears that the problem of freewill has a very intimate bearing upon the nature and meaning of the facts and values of the moral life. The denial of the possibility of real alternatives in human conduct seems to render impossible any adequate and satisfactory interpretation of moral phenomena; such terms as "right" and "wrong," "virtue" and "vice," "merit," and "demerit," "remorse" and "regret," "responsibility" and "punishment," are emptied of all real ethical meaning if our actions are ultimately determined by circumstances and conditions over which we have no sort of control. At least, this is the emphatic conviction of ordinary people; and although the exact thinker cannot consider himself bound by the opinions of the "man-in-the-street," "common-sense" is not always to be treated contemptuously and thrown ruthlessly aside by the philosopher.

Moreover, deeper reflection seems to confirm the view that moral responsibility depends upon the reality of freedom and that with the reality of freedom are "undeniably bound up all the interests of the moral and religious consciousness."¹² Both the moral government of God and the moral status of man are equally involved; how then can we be really indifferent to the problem of the Freedom of the Will? To assert that such indifference is justifiable is to go against the universal experience of the race, and to negate some of the noblest and finest ideas the mind of man has ever entertained. Sidgwick himself—despite his insistence upon "the practical unimportance of the Freewill controversy"—admits that human actions become "less meritorious" in so far as they are determined merely by the pressure of external circumstances or by uncontrolled natural impulses, and confesses that the denial of freedom tends to upset all our fundamental moral notions. He instances, in particular, the notion of Justice and urges that in the determination of what Justice requires a moral agent to do to his fellows it "makes some practical difference whether or not he is to regard those others as having been free agents. . . . For Justice as commonly

¹¹ A. E. Taylor, *The Elements of Metaphysics*, pp. 359-360.

¹² J. Seth, *A Study of Ethical Principles*, p. 370.

understood implies the due requital of good and ill Desert, and the common notion of Desert, when closely scrutinised, seems to involve free choice of good or evil; so that the denial of such free choice, dissipating our primitive notion of Desert, leaves us with the problem of determining Justice on some different principle."¹³ Moreover, even from the standpoint of an empirical study of Psychology the question of Freewill is far from unimportant; as Prof. Guido Villa urges: "The question of 'freewill' with respect to our moral actions, so much discussed in ancient and modern philosophy, is one of the gravest problems concerning the individual and the community, and upon its solution depends our conception of the real character of mental activity as compared with natural phenomena."¹⁴ This is a very salutary reminder in view of the position of psychologists, like Prof. Hoffding, who would foreclose all discussion of the problem of Freewill by their facetious assumption that psychology cannot even begin to do its work without first of all accepting a frankly deterministic attitude. It is true that from the ethical and metaphysical points of view the problem of Freewill has been made to seem insoluble by the construction of antinomies, but, as Prof. G. T. Ladd points out, the cure for this is not indifference to the problem, nor despair of its solution, but a "more thorough, unprejudiced, and profound criticism of the conceptions involved." And he adds: "All this is true whether these antithetic conceptions are evolved by the plain man's thinking, or by the profound but perverse analysis of Kant, or by the brilliant and subtle but fallacious dialectics of Dean Mansel or Mr. F. H. Bradley."¹⁵

Besides, the ethical importance of the problem of the Freedom of the Will seems to be indicated by the beginnings of the history of man's speculation upon this profound and far-reaching question. Very early in Greek thought the conception of "Fate" arose. "Fate is the counterpart of Fortune. They are two ways of looking at life; both are essentially connected with man. From the point of view of Fortune all is indeterminate; from the point of view of Fate all is determined. And Fate, like Fortune, attains to deity before our eyes during the course of Greek literature."¹⁶ As far back as the Homeric poems we meet with the plain recognition of the supremacy of Fate—though Homer knew nothing of the idea of Fortune—

¹³ H. Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 75.

¹⁴ G. Villa, *Contemporary Psychology*, p. 347.

¹⁵ G. T. Ladd, *The Philosophy of Conduct*, p. 135.

¹⁶ Article on "Fate," *Encyclop. of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. V.

and gradually the notion of a "predetermined order of destiny in the affairs of man" permeated the whole of Greek literature and became one of its chief characteristics right down to the beginning of the Christian era. By the time of Hesiod, the popular thought of Greece had pluralised and personified the conception of Fate in the figures of the three weird and stern sisters—the spinning-women, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos—who together spun and clipped the threads of mortal life. From popular thought the conception of Fate passed over into the Greek tragedies. "Awful," says Sophocles in *Antigone*, "is the mysterious power of Fate," and that is the general belief of the Greek tragedians. Nor is the notion absent from the Greek philosophers. Heraclitus, for example, believed that all things happen according to Fate and that the essence of Fate is "Reason" (*λόγος*). Plato (who was much influenced by Heraclitus), in his dialogues, everywhere takes for granted that there is a predetermined order of destiny, especially in relation to human affairs. In pre-Aristotelian literature, however, there are to be discovered two rival conceptions of Fate struggling for supremacy. The first regards Fate as a mysterious decree, depending for its effectiveness upon the will of the gods; the second regards it as a personification which stands above the gods, controlling their actions as well as those of men. The latter conception recedes into the background in post-Aristotelian literature, due no doubt to the influence of Aristotle, who rejected the notion of Fate as a principle superior to the gods, and who thus helped to free the idea from the inconsistencies of popular thought. Nevertheless, this conception of Fate as an independent principle or power controlling the actions of the gods themselves, despite its prominence in the mythology of the Greeks, is of the utmost significance in the history of Greek speculation, inasmuch as it is one of the indications of the transition from the mythical to the philosophical view of nature; it reveals the tendency to reach a principle of unity higher than the gods, and is thus an important landmark in the journey from polytheism to monotheism. The Epicureans and also the members of the later Academy flatly denied that there is any such thing as Fate, but the Stoics made much of the idea. Chrysippus, the most brilliant of all the followers of Zeno, asserted that the "essence of Fate is a spiritual power arranging the whole in order" and, following the lead of Heraclitus, identified it with the immanent Reason of the universe. Zeno himself regarded Fate as identical with Providence and with Nature, while Antipater asserted that Fate was God. But here the mythical idea of Fate has been

transformed into the principle of philosophical Necessity; and this was the prevailing conception of Fate in all post-Aristotelian Greek literature, both with those who accepted it and with those who rejected it.

Now the rise and spread of the conception of Fate in Greek thought brought with it the very practical problem of adjusting man's belief in his own autonomy to the idea of an irresistible power which (as we have pointed out above) was often regarded as controlling the actions and destinies of the gods, as well as those of men; and it was in the course, and as a result, of this prolonged attempt to bring about this adjustment between the idea of human freedom and the principle of Necessity—both occult and philosophical—that “the science of Ethics was born. Thus volition was first distinguished as a principle of Ethics.”¹⁷ Hence, the statement made above to the effect that the ethical importance of the problem of the Freedom of the Will seems to be indicated and confirmed by the beginnings of the history of man's thought upon this great question. And taking into consideration *all* that has been urged above it will be recognised that there is no inconsiderable evidence against the view that the question of Freewill is irrelevant for ethical—and, we may add, for religious—thought.

(b) Another reason why this question should be re-opened is to be found in certain tendencies of twentieth-century science. The science of the last century was frankly deterministic in outlook and point of view. Taking as its fundamental category the notion of the reign of natural law it tended more and more strongly towards the mechanistic interpretation of human personality. Mechanical theories of life were almost everywhere in the ascendant, and a theoretical materialism, which in the preceding century (with the exception of the very definite materialism of Hobbes) had been a very mild affair, rapidly gathered strength and became dominant. The tendency in almost every quarter was to regard man as a kind of very complex and delicately constructed machine—the highest point yet reached in the evolutionary process. The substantial existence of mind was blatantly denied, and all mental activities were treated merely as functions or products of the material organism. This view was well expressed by Vogt. “In my opinion,” he says, “every investigator of nature will, in the use of consistent thinking, come to the view that all those capabilities which we include under the name of activities of soul are simply functions of the brain substance, or—to employ a somewhat rude expression—that thoughts stand in the same

¹⁷ A. Alexander, *Theories of the Will*, p. 8.

relation to the brain as gall to the liver or urine to the kidneys." ¹⁸ Thus we see that mind was entirely ruled out of the universe, and the human organism looked upon as merely a mechanical combination of chemical and physical constituents. Now a necessary corollary of the mechanistic interpretation of personality is the denial of the reality of freedom. Those who espouse the cause of scientific materialism cannot logically regard Freewill as being anything other than an illusion, and nobody knows this better than the materialists themselves. Hence, the nineteenth-century materialists—despite their differences of opinion on several important points—were one in their assertion of the groundlessness of the notion of freedom. Their general attitude was well summed up in the words of Moleschott: "Man is the sum of parents and nurse, of time and place, of pleasure and weather, of sound and light, of food and clothing. His will is the necessary result of all these causes, bound to a law of nature, like the planet in its course, like the plant in its soil." ¹⁹ Such a conclusion seemed to be forced on them—so they asserted—by the universality of the reign of natural law; if man is a part of the universe, then he must be subject to the same laws of cause and effect as the rest of the universe. Moreover, both the new biology and the older psychology seemed definitely to support this point of view—the one with its insistence on the importance of the interaction between inherited and environmental factors in the development of life, the other with its doctrine of the "association of ideas." There seemed to be no room in the universe for the creative activity of mind; all was determined by a Fate that was none the less inexorable because it was scientific rather than occult.

In the thought of the present time there are indications of tendencies in the opposite direction. Only one of these can be noted here—and that but briefly.

(i) The mechanistic interpretation of life is based upon a law which belongs to the whole domain of science, viz., the law of the Conservation of Energy. Stated in its most general terms this law asserts that the total sum of the energy of the universe is a constant which is never increased nor decreased; although changes may take place in the distribution of this energy its quantity is strictly determinate. This principle was first recognised by Kant as a general concept, but its modern formulation as a category of natural science is due to Mayer, Joule and Helmholtz. Now it is obvious that if the sum-total of the energy in the universe is constant and invariable (even

¹⁸ Quoted in H. C. Sheldon, *Unbelief in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 64.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

though its form is constantly changing), anything in the nature of the creative activity of mind is ruled out. From any point of view, such creative activity would be a miracle, and "miracles do not happen" in a mechanistic universe, for the simple reason that they would be a denial and abrogation of the principle of the conservation of energy. For a long time, this was the general point of view of the physicist; he was so certain of the universal applicability of this fundamental concept that he felt more than justified, by a rigorous logic, in denying the reality of mind, and with it the reality of freedom. Present science, however, is not quite so sure on this point. In his earliest work, McDougall attacked this doctrine—or rather its application to the realm of life and mind—as an unjustifiable extension of the law of the conservation of energy. He urged that it begs the question at issue "by assuming that the physical energy of the universe is a closed and finite system," and pointed out that "in many cases of transformation of physical energy a part of the energy disappears, or becomes latent, though by a convenient fiction it is said to become potential energy," all that we know of this potential energy being "that it is recoverable and capable of giving rise again to a quantity of energy equal to that which disappeared."²⁰ A few years later, McDougall wrote "one even hears whispered doubts about the law of the conservation of energy,"²¹ and more recently Prof. A. N. Whitehead has stressed the same point.²² And that they are correctly interpreting the trend of modern physical science may be seen by reference to some leading physicists. Prof. Bohr, for example, in his theory of the structure of the atom finds that he can give a more adequate explanation of certain facts, if he rejects the mechanistic hypothesis and makes non-mechanical assumptions.²³ Again, Prof. Frederick Soddy—another physicist who is seeking to explore the structure of the atom—in his *Cartesian Economics*, says: "I have no claim to call or express an opinion on the reality of the existence of intelligence apart from and outside of life. But that life is the expression of the interaction of two totally distinct things represented by probability and *freewill* is to me self-evident, though the ultimate nature of these two different things will probably remain, a thousand years hence, as far off as ever."²⁴ Yet again,

²⁰ W. McDougall, *Primer of Physiological Psychology*, pp. 8-9.

²¹ W. McDougall, *Body and Mind*, p. 216.

²² In his *Science and the Modern World*.

²³ * ²⁴ See *The Battle of Behaviorism*, by J. B. Watson and W. McDougall, pp. 74 and 83.

another physicist, Prof. A. S. Eddington, in his recent "Gifford Lectures" shows that the developments of the quantum theory—i.e., the theory that it is part of the character of the atom that its behaviour shall be to some extent indeterminate—are leading physicists to reject the principle of strict determinism in their world. He denies that there is any known primary law of universal application (not even the law of gravitation) and urges that "it is difficult to see now any justification for the strongly rooted conviction of a deterministic system of law."²⁵ It seems as if the old nightmare of a rigid mechanism and a universal determinism that so often has disturbed the minds of men is on the point of vanishing away; and if so there is some reason for a reconsideration of the problem of freedom. Certainly there are no adequate grounds for saying that the age-long controversy on this question of Freewill has been definitely concluded in a victory for scientific Determinism.

Further proof of this latter contention could be obtained by a consideration of the doctrine of Emergent Evolution (so closely associated with the names of Dr. C. Lloyd Morgan and Prof. S. A. Alexander) and by a consideration of the doctrine of Teleological Determination (so ably advocated by Dr. William McDougall), but space forbids. Nor have we space to show how the discrediting of that bulwark of Determinism known as the old "Associationist Psychology" (which received its death-blow in Mr. F. H. Bradley's *Principles of Logic*, and only awaits decent burial) has increased the logical difficulties of those who wish to deny the reality of human freedom. But it is worth noting that in each case there has been a departure from the mechanistic interpretation of life, and any departure from such an interpretation means that another breach has been made in the defences of the Determinists. And this means support for the Christian philosophy of life. After all, the problem of Freewill is not an indifferent one for the Christian believer—it is a doctrine of vital importance. Whatever may be said in favour of Augustinian or Calvinistic Predestinarianism, it is perfectly clear that if the mechanistic interpretation of life is justified Christianity is nothing more than a "cunningly devised fable." The reality of human freedom is an integral part of the Gospel; indeed, as Dr. H. Wildon Carr says: "The idea of freedom originated in the Christian conception of man's relation to God, and the problem of freewill first became explicit in the development of Christian doctrine."²⁶ Anything, therefore, which helps to destroy the citadel of modern scientific determinism is a welcome ally of the Christian thinker.

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²⁵ A. S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, p. 331.

²⁶ H. Wildon Carr, *The Unique Status of Man*, p. 8.