

A CONCEPT OF MAN

I

It is often urged that one of the major findings of modern scientific age is that the universe is totally governed by strict deterministic laws. Does the human kind constitute an exception to this claim? I propose in this essay to develop and argue for an affirmative reply to this question.

I find the thesis of absolute determinism not in order at least with regard to ourselves mainly for three reasons. First, the thesis of absolute determinism cannot consistently be propounded as a philosophical doctrine. Secondly, determinism cannot be true of our lived life. Thirdly, man as an agent cannot be denied freedom. I shall take up these points in order, in the next section and the two following.

II

* The theory of absolute determinism (TAD) can keep itself alive only by annihilating itself. This self-inconsistency of TAD consists in the fact that it cannot consistently be offered for consideration. To ask us to consider a thesis is to ask us to judge it and then, if found acceptable, to choose it and reject as false a theory that contradicts it. TAD, however, is one which denies the possibility of choice, and therefore refutes itself. If all our deeds, thoughts and benefits are thoroughly determined, that would be the end of choice about reasoning, since we would be left only with *necessary* reasoning. If no evaluation of reasoning can in principle be made, how can the determinist argue with a straight face that his position is the right and true one? We cannot argue to a conclusion which undermines the value of argument. If whatever

we think is a necessary product of all of the factors that determine our thoughts and beliefs, then in each of us the thoughts are what they must be; consequently, no discourse, including that of the determinist, can be put forward for rational appraisal. No one will ever be justified in claiming any view to be true, determinism included. But if, on the other hand, it is urged that TAD has been formulated and developed in and through some ingenious reasoning, then the determinist's whole reasoning should be carried out on a level above any on which determinism can have any relevance. The determinist in this way is like one who writes something down and then at a certain point does erase it. Or, to change the analogy, the acceptance of TAD ultimately will lead, to use an example given by Ramsey in a different context, to 'the absurd position of the child in the following dialogue: "Say breakfast". "Can't". "What can't you say?" "Can't say breakfast".¹ TAD in this way is unable to provide a non-self-contradictory legitimation of itself, and of the means whereby we have arrived at it. In truth, the determinist, while avowing a deterministic theory of human thought and action, is tacitly exempting himself from the theory, and he is there as the best witness against its truth. Furthermore, it appears extremely difficult to envisage in what way TAD could at all be tested. If all human thoughts and actions are determined in every way, there would be left no room whatsoever to test any theory - TAD included, for to test a theory it is necessary that things can be manipulated, in the last analysis, freely. If human freedom is truly an illusion, no human being would ever be free to develop and examine any theory in any sphere. The whole point may be put succinctly: none of us can have any reason for supposing any view, TAD included, to be true if TAD is true; conversely, if we do have reasonable grounds for believing anything at all to be true, then TAD is refuted. The thesis of absolute determinism in this way is, if I may speak a bit rudely, an intrinsically hopeless position.

The determinist might at this point insist that all the above arguments do not really refute his theory, but only prevent him from *proclaiming* it, i.e., from providing grounds for accepting it to be true. It is still possible, as he might urge, that what he is asserting is true. This however, will not do. For in that case any damn theory could be regarded as true. If there is no burden

to establish a theory as true, or, if its truth-claim is withdrawn, then, one might wonder, in what serious sense the theory could be regarded as a genuine philosophical view. And, to be frank, in that case we, as philosophers, would have nothing to bother about the alleged 'theory'.

III

It would be interesting to note that even if the point that, in order to be true, TAD need not be offered as a philosophical doctrine be conceded, the determinist would not gain much. For one thing, life as it is lived by us would largely be inexplicable and appear rather enigmatic if determinism reigns everywhere in it. If, that is, we are ready to draw conclusions from the way we *do* live with each other, it would become really hard to embrace full-fledged determinism. Truly speaking, with regard to our interpersonal relationships, TAD appears—thanks to Strawson³—quite out of place. This is because our interpersonal relationships essentially involve various 'reactive attitudes' (as Strawson very aptly terms them⁴), such as gratitude, remorse, resentment and the like, the validity of which is hardly tenable in the web of complete determinism.

This sort of view, though not exactly this one, is also upheld by another philosopher—Corliss Lamont. To quote him: '...in the novel dialect of determinism many words lose their normal meaning. I refer to such words as *refraining*, *forbearance*, *self-restraint*, and *regret*. If determinism turns out to be true, we shall have to scrap a great deal in existing dictionaries and do a vast amount of redefining. What meaning, for example, is to be assigned to *forbearance* when it is determined in advance that you are going to refuse that second Martini cocktail? You can truly forbear only when you refrain from doing something that it is possible for you to do. But under the determinist dispensation it is not possible for you to accept the second cocktail because fate has already dictated your "No"'.⁵

Anyway, let us come back to the point of interpersonal relationships. Not infrequently, in our relations with one another we display and think that we have good reason to display such feelings as gratitude and resentment. Again, we often take pride

in our achievements and feel remorse for what we regard as misdeeds. These sorts of interpersonal relations, it may be noted, may be of two kinds. First, they may be such within which the reactive attitudes grow; or, secondly, they may be (which Strawson seems not to take note of, but which Bennett very intelligently notices⁶) such toward which the reactive attitudes readily point. To illustrate both: if I resent someone's treatment of me, there may already have been some non-detached relation between us; or there may not have been antecedently any such relation between us, though my very resentment immediately creates one, or sets the stage for one. Be that as it may, it should be clear that any of these non-detached attitudes could not be justified or at least would become utterly pointless if determinism reigns over all actions to the effect that none of us could ever have acted otherwise than as he did. Any such attitude is justified only if it is assumed that the person about whom the attitude is shown deserves it. But to handle people in a deterministic fashion is to leave out of account any question of whether it is an individual's fault that he has done something wrong or whether it is to the individual's credit that he has done something right.

If in this way freedom is the logical postulate of interpersonal discourse, then, to the extent we are incapable of omitting our interpersonal relationships (entailing the reactive attitudes to ourselves and each other) from the account of life, TAD simply becomes inapplicable to the human world. We may add more. Just as no theory of number would be worth defending if it did not minimally give an account of our entrenched practice of counting, similarly no theory of human beings would be worth defending if it did not capture or range over our practice of interpersonal relationships. To deny man these relationships would be to eliminate some of the most profound of human existence. This is because man must live not merely *among* but *with* other human beings; consequently he *must* be a citizen of the interpersonal world in which people matter to each other; hence different reactive attitudes *must* obtain in human life. So, if these attitudes do not allow man to run his life without freedom, if freedom is a precondition of these attitudes and hence of human life too, then surely the demise of our freedom would amount to the demise of human life itself. Seen in this light, our lived life does not simply allow us to

deny freedom in it. On the contrary, it (the lived life) demands us rather to axiomatically assume ourselves as free beings. To put the whole point in one proposition: even if TAD could be retained at a theoretical level, in practice things do not work out in quite deterministic way. If, however, the determinist urges that in maintaining that man is determined, he has in mind a sort of 'man in abstraction', then, we are afraid, his whole thesis would be empty of that deep and important sense in which a given outlook is 'on' for people at the actually lived level, and in that case we have really nothing serious to quarrel with him. For, we are here concerned not with any 'theoretic man' which instantiates none of *us*.

Apart from this 'existential undeniableess' of our freedom in action, there seems to be a sort of desirability of it. For, the enjoyment of freedom in action means the satisfaction of certain desires - desires that we possess as social beings - whereas its absence means their frustration. The satisfactions at stake are those which accrue to a person of whom it may be said that he lives in a community of persons. The corresponding frustrations are those suffered by a person of whom it may be said that he is estranged from such a community or that he finds himself a helpless or a completely passive bystander to the activities of his fellow beings.

TAD, thus, becomes an unworkable position - to say the least - in *human* life.

IV

Next comes the point of human agency. And our task is to show how this aspect of ourselves is quite difficult to liquidate or explain adequately in terms of the deterministic model, i.e. in the model in which the occurrence of anything X is so (causally) connected with the later occurrence of something else Y that given X, Y *must* occur. It is important to stress what the *denial* of this exactly amounts to. It is this: the occurrence of X does *not* make the occurrence of Y absolutely necessary, i.e. the occurrence of X does *not necessitate* the occurrence of Y. Let us then see how man's agency makes it impossible to apply the deterministic model to him.

At least one condition seems to be necessary for saying of a man P that he is the agent of a certain action A, namely that P can, in some ultimate sense, be said to *own* A and in that way is supposed to have a particular *answerability* for A. It is not necessarily implied that everyone does answer for all or any of his acts; but it is implied that everyone is answerable, i.e. is liable to answer, for what he *does*. Indeed, being answerable is inalienably linked up with the idea of agency. Had people never conceived of themselves as answerable beings, it is doubtful whether they would ever have thought of themselves as agents either.

Now, to hold someone *particularly answerable* for some action is not just to ask for a mere explanation, but to take *him* to task for the action. The importance of answerability may vary with the seriousness of the case; what might appear trifling in one case may be quite pressing in a rather extreme one. Thus, the excusability of actions done in negligence or inadvertently varies with the gravity of the 'offence'. Austin once pointed out that 'I did it inadvertently' is excusable, if I did tread on a snail but not if I did tread on a baby. In any case, the point remains: if to call P the *agent* of A (of whatever sort) is not a mere verbiage or a linguistic fiction but something seriously meant, then P is answerable for A. Now, it might be obvious that P's owning as well as being answerable for A entails, among other things, that the occurrence of A was not due to some antecedent factors all of which did lie entirely beyond P's manipulation, i.e., that P was in some way or other able to intervene into or arrest some or all of the steps leading to the occurrence of A, in brief, there prevailed some real opportunity somewhere for P to make A *not* to happen. Suppose that there were always a sufficient set of conditions such that a man could never help but do exactly as he does. But *if* there were such a set, we could never meaningfully speak of his being answerable for what he does. In other words, any thesis that holds that each of us is a field of causes - an arena where all the occurrences *inevitably* follow exclusively from antecedent factors, cannot possibly elucidate what we mean by action, agent and answerability. Indeed, for my answerability, for any of my actions, to have any validity or even significance, there must be some area, with regard to whatever I do, within which

I can exercise my own discretion. For, if there is not- if it is the case that there was no scope whatsoever for me to have the option of whether or not to do A, prior to doing A, or, in case A has already taken place, whether or not to do it once more, it would be really inept to say that I *did* A. My understanding to do a certain thing means both that it would be possible for me not to do it and that I exclude this possibility. It is important to note that for P's being the agent of A it is necessary that 'doing A' and 'not doing A' are *simultaneously possible* for him to actualise and he opts for doing A. Once this essential link between *agency* and the corresponding *option* be seriously recognised, it can hardly be maintained, as some have done,⁷ that to undermine the sense of freedom does not automatically undermine agency.

In fact, it is ultimately upon this option that anyone is deemed answerable for, and thus is taken to be the agent of, his action.⁸ The agent's being answerable for his action would itself become utterly pointless or else would amount to some unacceptable position, if he is denied the said option altogether. For, to deny P this option would in the last analysis amount to asserting that whatever P *does* is the only thing that he can *do*. But clearly it would be wrong to demand that what someone *does* and what he *can* do should, of necessity, coincide. Furthermore, to uphold this sort of coincidence would be to deny that anyone could ever *do* anything except in the trivial and unexciting sense that each of us is just present as a mere figure in the whole drama in which none could ever fail to play the allotted role to the perfection.

V

So we conclude: the phenomenon of man is not just a part of the natural, i.e. the physical, order. Infected by the tendency to maintain the the so-called unity of science, many wish to subject every phenomenon in the universe to the 'scientific model', urging that everything must be understandable by the employment of scientific theories. There is no harm, as such, in being immersed in the scientific tradition. But things begin to become dangerous when one gets oneself trapped or overwhelmed by it and consequently begins to fail to appreciate or to refuse to acknowledge whatever eludes science. If we are speaking of the practicability of 'scientific

explanation', it is in fact a good rule that every phenomenon is or could be totally explicable exclusively in 'scientific terms', except when we come to the phenomenon of man. To argue that the human creatures are completely explainable by the scientific method alone is to construe knowledge of persons on the model of knowledge of material object which persons, in all likelihood, are not. If, on the other hand, some phenomena cannot be captured in the scientific net, why not forget the ambition of capturing everything in the scientific net? Reality is not just physical reality, and any physical conception of reality must include an acknowledgement of its own incompleteness. Of course, one might argue that our bodies and in particular our central nervous systems are in toto subject to the physical laws. But, then, one must be careful to recognise that this sort of view leaves the main question, how anything in the world can be a subject in interpersonal relationships or can be an answerable agent, unanswered. The crucial question is not whether description of ourselves can be given solely in scientific or physicalistic terms, but whether this sort of description leaves a significant gap in our conception of ourselves as *humans*. I think it does.*

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. F.P. Ramsey, 'Philisophy' in *Logical Positivism* (ed. A.J.Ayer), The Free Press, New York, 1969, p. 325
2. Cf. Augustine Shutte, 'The Refutation of Determinism' in *Philosophy*, Vol.59, No. 230, Oct., 1984, p. 485.
3. See his 'Freedom and Resentment' in his *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, Methuen, London 1974.
4. *Ibid.* These attitudes are also called by Strawson "'sentiments" toward ourselves and others'. See his *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, p. 31.
5. Colliss Lamont, 'Freedom of Choice and Human Responsibility' in *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues* (eds. John R. Burn and Milton Goldinger), Macmillan Publishing & Co., Inc., New York, 1980, p.30.

6. Jonathan Bennett, 'Accountability' in *Philosophical Subjects* (ed. Zak Straaten), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 43.
7. For example, see R. Taylor, *Action and Purpose*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1966, p. 140. Also see Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, p. 111.
8. I am not claiming that this is the only way to bring out the logic of human agency. Others have tried to explicate the notion of agency in ways different from the present one. One may recall here the famous essay 'Agency' of Donald Davidson. [In *Agent, Action, and Reason* (eds. Robert Binkley and others), Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1971.] He there gives a necessary mark of agency in terms of intention. He claims that a person P is the agent of an event *a* only if there is some description, *x* of *a* such that '*P* did *x* intentionally' is true. I would not, for obvious reasons, go into the details of Davidson's view. But one thing perhaps is clear: Davidson's view would not be inconsistent with ours insofar as an action is identified as one done intentionally by the agent. (For some critical comments about Davidson's thesis, see James Cornman's 'Comments' in *Ibid*)

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