

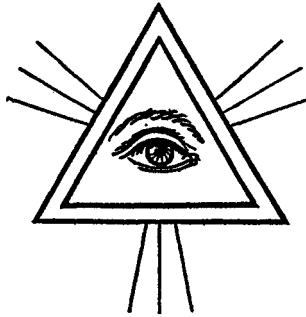
Moral Wisdom

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

ONE of the problems which philosophers have discussed for centuries without reaching a convincing conclusion is that of free will or moral freedom. Are our volitions determinate in the sense that they are the inevitable consequences of rigid, undeviating causal sequences? or does something new, springing spontaneously from the depth of our being, somehow enter into them? Daily we are called upon to choose between alternative courses in matters great or small. We must decide which of several competing claims we shall fulfill, or whether we shall act or refrain from action. As we face such a choice, we never doubt our freedom to take whatever course we deem best. Until the decision has been made and carried into effect, the alternative routes seem equally available to us. It is only when we reflect upon our decision in retrospect that we begin to doubt whether we were in fact as free to select the rejected course as we imagined ourselves to be while it still lay in the future.

We see that there were many factors, rooted in the very structure of our temperament and character, that compelled us irresistibly to select one alternative and reject the others. We were indeed free to choose the way which, considered in the light of all its foreseeable consequences, most appealed to us; but the fact that it did appeal to us was determined by our inherited constitution and all our previous experiences. In what sense, then, did our choice escape the rule of iron necessity?

Men argue so heatedly in favor of free will because they resent the bondage to the past which its denial implies. But if they grasped the implications of the opposing view, they



might be less eager to support it. If not strictly determined by the immediately preceding situation, an event, whether physical or psychic, would be wholly capricious and unpredictable. If our volitions were free in the sense that they did not obey any sort of causation, anyone might do anything at any moment, and he could no more be held responsible for his act than a man can be held accountable for the course taken by his runaway horse. We should be continually doing things which we would at the next minute regret, because our choice was not controlled by our total personality and did not faithfully reflect it. In accepting the doctrine of free will to avoid the disagreeable implications of determinism, we jump from the frying pan into the fire.

The truth seems to be that our volitions are determinate or subject to causality, but that in a developed mind the causal nexus follows a path so different from that in any mechanical system that mental causation is of a different order from physical causation and can hardly be understood by it. So far as we know, no physical system attempts to look into the future before responding to the forces acting immediately upon it, as a thinking being does whenever he faces a choice whose consequences promise to be momentous to him. When it moves, an inanimate body takes a path determined by the resultant of *all* the forces acting upon it; whereas, no matter how powerfully some course of action solicits us before our decision is made, once we have dismissed it in favor of some other plan we often act just as though the rejected attraction were non-existent.

Even plants have not achieved this

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independence of competing attractions. When a growing green shoot is exposed to light coming from different directions, it bends toward a point intermediate to the two sources instead of turning straight toward the stronger light. If organized like a physical system or even like a plant, Balaam's ass in the philosophical riddle would indeed starve to death if placed exactly midway between two equally tempting bundles of hay; yet, no one who knows donkeys has any doubt what the outcome of such an experiment would be.

In all probability, then, our volitions are in typical cases causally determined, not by the kind of causation that prevails in physical systems, but by a unique form of causal sequence that gives us a control over our destiny such as no inanimate body enjoys. This is true even if we accept the contention that mind or consciousness is only an attribute of a complex material system. If, as seems probable, mind is not merely a manifestation of matter, its thoughts may still be strictly determinate, although obedient to causal rules distinct from those which reign in the realm of matter. Although in either case mental causation is different from physical causation, on the second view it is even more radically distinct. I see no reason for anyone's rejecting the conclusion that our volitions follow some form of causality merely because this seems incompatible with his notions of human dignity or his aspiration for freedom. Could we be free unless our every volition were strictly determined by what we essentially are?

As stated earlier, when facing a choice scarcely anyone doubts his perfect freedom to elect the course which appears best to him; and it is only when viewing in retrospect a decision which has been irrevocably made that we sometimes doubt whether our choice was as free as it appeared to be. Since our solution of the problem of freedom hardly exerts an appreciable effect upon our actual choices, the active man might look upon the question as of no importance to himself, but merely one of those puzzles which fill the leisure of armchair philosophers. But freedom of choice cannot be so lightly brushed aside even by men of action; for two momentous questions of practical importance are indissolubly bound up with it—personal responsibility and retributive punishment. The problem of moral freedom is implicit in every sentence handed down in a criminal court.

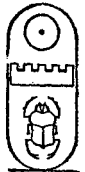
Conduct and Responsibility

If adamantine causal sequences rule our thoughts and govern our volitions no less than the courses of the planets and the reactions in a test tube, how can anyone be held responsible for his deeds? No one doubts that one's conduct is in large measure determined by his heredity, the influences of his home, his education, and the prevailing social atmosphere. The only question is whether it is completely determined by these precedent and external influences. If one's conduct is wholly so determined, how can the murderer be held responsible for his murder and the robber for his theft? Would it not be most unjust to punish him for what he could not avoid doing?

As a practical measure, whatever view it takes of the problem of moral freedom, society must for its own safety treat its members as though they were wholly responsible for all they do. The man may indeed be merely a focus of events which flowed into him from the most distant past and from all sides—a mere puppet in the hands of fate. But it is impossible to trace back all these contributory causes and deal with each one separately, dividing a murderer's punishment between his drunken father and his profligate mother, his incompetent teachers, all those who set him a vicious example in his im-

Philosophers and scientists through the ages have considered from many viewpoints the problem of free will, and the exercise of freedom and choice by individuals. Articles on this subject have appeared before in the *Rosicrucian Digest*; and, of course, studies of it have been made in other Rosicrucian literature.

Here, we have a presentation which should be of much interest to every thinking individual. The author is a recognized scientist in a specialized field of biology. In this writing, he has applied his scientific knowledge, as well as *his own philosophy*, to this subject. Each age in history creates its peculiar problems, and man should constantly analyze his own position of responsibility in dealing with the world of which he is a part.



pressionable childhood, and the community at large for permitting so many unwholesome situations in its midst.

Society must, so to speak, gather up all these contributing strands where they are entangled in a tight knot in the culprit himself, and deal with the knot rather than with the converging filaments. It is not a question of justice so much as of necessity. And even if it decides to make the murderer's punishment vindictive rather than merely corrective and preventive, perhaps this procedure is not so unreasonable as it is often alleged to be. We cannot separate a man from his deeds merely by claiming that they are the result of an ineluctable necessity. The man himself is a product of the same necessity; he and his acts are inseparably interwoven of the same causal strands. If the whole course of cosmic events has resulted in a noisome concrescence at that particular locus in time and space which we call John Brown, it does not seem unfair that other men, who have been outraged by his flagrant misdeeds, should retaliate upon him.

Although the uncertainty as to the nature of moral freedom must always be allowed to cast a doubt upon the fairness of vindictive punishment, the question is of mere academic interest, because there are other and better reasons for avoiding it. Even if it were not considered unreasonable to inflict retributive pains upon a miscreant who is in the grip of iron necessity, the moment punishment ceases to be corrective or preventive it breeds resentment and further crime, and one who punishes in an angry and vengeful mood departs from the highest moral principles and harms his own spirit. These are the reasons for our scrupulously shunning retaliatory punishment.

When arraigned before the court, the criminal or his counsel urges every extenuating circumstance and uses every art to make it appear that he is not responsible for his crime. And in a smaller way, we all tend to do the same thing before the tribunal of our conscience or the judgment of our intimates. We excuse our shortcomings, weaknesses, and surrenders to passion by recalling our perhaps unfortunate heredity, the errors in our early train-

ing, the evils of contemporary society, and a thousand other contributory factors over which we had no control. In view of the obscurity enveloping the problem of moral freedom and the deterministic explanations of human conduct in which modern psychology abounds, we have every right to take this course. There can be no doubt that ancestors, early environment, education, and the contemporary atmosphere exert a powerful influence upon every man's conduct; yet, we did not select our parents, could do scarcely anything to improve the conditions in which we passed our earliest years, were rarely allowed to choose our teachers, and have a negligible influence upon the society into whose midst we were cast as helpless infants. When we throw the blame for our aberrations and failures upon causes beyond our control, we do nothing wicked or absurd, and no one can prove that we are wrong.

Yet if it is permissible to take this attitude toward ourselves, it is morally fatal to do so. Such a willful surrender of one's autonomy is the annihilation of his ethical personality. We view ourselves as a mere focus of causal sequences, as little able to alter their course as the point in empty space upon which rays of light converge can change their direction. We divest ourselves of radical responsibility at the price of our human dignity.

What alternative course is open to us? We can voluntarily assume the responsibility for all those causal sequences, stretching as far back into the remote past as we care to project our thought, which have made us what we are. Our parents, who were not of our choosing, have transmitted to us weaknesses and faults of character which have been a constant tribulation to us and perhaps also physical defects that handicap us.

In the impressionable years of our childhood we were exposed to unwholesome influences which have left indelible scars upon our spirit; our present circumstances are not as we strove to make them. Very well, we voluntarily accept all this sad legacy of the years and make it our own. The burden was thrust upon us by alien powers; but we bear it bravely, without remon-

strance or complaint. We do not pause to discuss baffling metaphysical questions of causation and responsibility; by a voluntary act we make ourselves accountable for all that we do, and by this free acceptance of our own personality demonstrate our autonomy. The behaviorist may, if it amuses him, explain all our attitudes, words, and deeds as the necessary outcome of circumstances beyond our control; but we make every choice as though the full weight of it rested upon ourselves alone.

Only by such full and uncompromising acceptance of everything which the unalterable past has poured into that which I call *myself* can I constitute myself an ethical person. I do not wait until society for its own ends fixes responsibility upon me, for such imputed responsibility is a fiction. I anticipate society, claiming responsibility as my birthright, and thereby assert my freedom.

This voluntary acceptance of responsibility is no idle boast, no childish gesture of defiance to an inexorable fate. The chain of causation may pass

unbroken, within the mind as in the external world, with all the iron rigor which nineteenth century materialism ascribed to it. Yet we are as certain as we can be of anything that in choices of the sort which we call *voluntary*, the causal sequence follows a unique route which sets it sharply apart from the causal nexus we observe in purely physical systems. Such choices are made with a view to the future, and in reaching them we can give our ideals and aspirations a voice in shaping the course of coming events. Necessity may rule in the will no less than in the falling stone, but it is now an enlightened not a blind necessity. Causal sequences which, for all we know, have since the beginning of time coursed through the world without a definite end are by the moral will at last given a purpose and redirected toward an ideal goal. By the free acceptance of responsibility we begin to make ourselves what we aspire to be, autonomous units dedicated to the sacred task of increasing harmony everywhere and in all its forms.



TRUTH CLOSE AT HAND

BELOW are the comments of Benjamin Franklin, famous American statesman, on the tolerance of Michael Wohlforth. The latter was associated with a sect at Ephrata, Pennsylvania. This sect was composed of mystics who perpetuated many Rosicrucian doctrines, rites, and symbols brought with them from Europe.

This modesty in a sect is perhaps a singular instance in the history of mankind. Every other sect supposes itself in possession of full truth and that those who differ are so far in the wrong; like a man traveling in foggy weather, those at some distance before him on the road he sees wrapped up in a fog, as well as those behind him, and also the people in the fields on each side, but near him all appears clear, though in truth he is as much in the fog as any of them.

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN



Reckon the days in which you have not been angry. I used to be angry every day; now every other day, then every third and fourth day; and if you miss it so long as thirty days, offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God.

—EPICTETUS

