On the Freedom of the Will

By Dr Albert Bazala

I once chanced upon a sentence that philosophical concepts have a history, yet no content; and it has often seemed to me that the *problem of free will* has had more history than content. There is no system of some standing in the history of philosophy that has not tried, in one way or another, to resolve it; yet there is also no problem that has trudged through philosophical history with as much indeterminacy and obscurity as this one. There is none, indeed, that has lent itself to as much twisting and turning, upon which many a blade of the human intellect has been broken, yet which none has cut open. There is none that has had as many unsuccessful solutions as this one, surely only due to the indeterminacy of its content. Obviously, for *its* content, it has had too great a history. And yet, it has always been regarded a "great question" (*une grande question*). As Du Bois-Reymond says, it seemingly concerns all, it is accessible to all, it is tightly bound up with the fundamental conditions of human society, it is most deeply intertwined with religious conviction; thus, it has played a role of immeasurable importance in the history of spirit and culture and clearly reflects the developmental stages of the human spirit. Some thought that, upon the freedom of the will, the value of human life depends; thus says Fichte: "The system of freedom satisfies my heart; the opposite system destroys and annihilates it. To stand, cold and unmoved, amid the current of events, a passive mirror of fugitive and passing phenomena – this existence is insupportable to me". To others it seemed that the conviction of free will is the greatest delusion of the human spirit, and they stood astonished before the fact that man has cast aside so many delusions, yet stubbornly clings to this one. A contradiction clearly exists in the human soul, aptly marked by Goethe, who says: "Let a man but think himself free, and he at once feels bound; yet let him dare to deem himself bound, and immediately he feels free".

Hence, is there free will or isn't there? So has the question most often been posed; and the answers to it move in two opposite directions, known as *determinism* and *indeterminism*.

Indeterminism claims that the will is free; by that it means that, in his willing, man is independent of causes and influences; for even if the will is constantly pressed by causes and reasons, its *decision* is independent of them

such that under the same conditions it can decide hither or thither. The will thus decides irrespective of motives. Proponents of this direction appeal chiefly to the feeling of freedom; without the feeling of freedom there is, so they say, neither responsibility nor accountability, neither desert nor sin. Freedom is demanded by moral consciousness, and, as Kant has said, the proof of it lies in ethics. *Determinism* upholds the contrary view. According to it, the will is bound to motives, and necessarily arises from a man's character and the particular circumstances in which he finds himself. Therefore, if one were to know all motives and all circumstances, one could determine in each individual case how the will must needs have decided. A sense of freedom is an illusion; even if man *feels* free, it does not yet follow that he *is*. The proof, however, that he is not is derived not only from the general law of causality, but also from an appeal to the social connectedness of the individual and his dependence upon society, to the influence of heredity, particularly manifest in pathological phenomena, and even to so-called moral statistics, which show that the average number of certain crimes, omissions, and some other acts is fairly constant, so that human willing under relatively constant influences manifests itself in a fairly uniform manner.

In this way, then, both views locate the core of the problem of free will in whether willing is determined under the influence of motives or not. *For indeterminism, the will is a sort of isolated factor*; *for determinism, an automatic product*. The former rests upon a sense of freedom, yet conflicts with many facts of our experience; the latter takes greater heed of these facts, but cannot account for the sense of freedom, and responsibility and accountability likewise cause it difficulties. And so there is no end to the fruitless discussion for and against, which establishes its history in the weaknesses and faults of each opponent. Yet the sheer amount of expended effort should already persuade us that the problem of free will is either illusory or ill-posed, and that its resolution is to be sought in a different direction.

Let us begin with the concept of freedom. Schopenhauer maintains that the concept of freedom is negative; that is to say, it always signifies an absence of something. Accordingly, we speak of free fall, when a body does not, for instance, fall along an incline that would impede it, but simply through the air; so too we speak of free development, when a being develops unhindered, in accordance with its nature. Freedom thus always signifies the absence of certain conditions, a freedom from *something*; freedom in general, or as such, is nothing at all. Therefore, every being, including man, can in some manner be bound, and yet in another be deemed free. Thus no being can act otherwise than according to its nature, in adherence with the laws of its being, and yet

does not thereby cease to be free; on the contrary, the more its manifestation proceeds from its nature, the freer it is – for it is not hindered by alien influence. Freedom is not lawlessness or chance, but the capacity to act according to law, nature, or one's own character. In this manner, man is free if he can move his limbs unhindered – even if he cannot fly; he is free also when his inner life is not burdened by morbid (pathological) disorders, even if he cannot peer into the fourth dimension. Hence it follows that man can in one respect be free, but in another unfree; a bound man is unfree in body, yet may be free in spirit.

If we understand freedom in this manner – as the absence of certain conditions, while at the same time remaining bound to certain innate conditions – it will clearly not seem odd that we are not seeking "*freedom*", but "*freedom from something*". This "something" ought to be specified, so as to establish the conditions under which we may rightly speak of freedom. None will then be able to object if we do not seek freedom *outside of causality or beyond lawful necessity*. Namely, freedom will not be a *cause* of action, nor a force capable of producing anything, but merely a certain form of action. Freedom cannot break the chain of causes, for it does not hover above them; rather, it is wholly within them, as a certain mode of action that is, in some respect, valuable to us. In other words, we *qualify* certain actions as free.

Let us apply this to human willing. The question is: can the will be called free, and if so, in what sense?

By "will" we understand all of our willing; will is thus merely a collective term; it is not a being of any kind. This should be firmly kept in mind, and it might be more fitting to speak of free willing, and of a free will merely as a capacity for free willing. May we then call willing free?

It ought to be mentioned in advance that *conscious willing* is the high point of mental activity. The lowest point of such activity consists in so-called *reflex movements*, which arise in response to external stimuli and are mostly useful for a definite purpose (for example, the closing of the eyelids to keep things from entering the eye); we perform them without so much as thinking of their purpose. On the next level are so-called *instincts*, which likewise serve certain vital purposes; here, too, the purpose is not conscious, but the choice of means to accomplish that purpose is carried out more or less consciously and with intent. With *drives*, the purpose itself becomes conscious, but since they are directed chiefly by powerful feelings, they can become so vehement as to overpower reason. In conscious willing, decision follows from clear judgments, set upon a deliberate purpose; the choice of means also proceeds on the basis of reasoning and lucid judgment. It should also be mentioned that, although man is indeed capable of conscious willing, in such willing and acting the lower levels

contend with the highest level and occasionally prevail; that strong feelings, affects such as fear and despair, can impose themselves upon the will and gain dominion over it, is a well-known fact.

According to what we have mentioned previously, in the matter of the freedom of the will, we will not be concerned with freedom as such, but with freedom from something. In asserting that the will is independent of external influences as well as internal motives, indeterminism seeks to capture "freedom" as such. Yet not only is such "freedom" no more than an empty word, but it does not exist; our whole experience rebels against it. It tells us that our will is always moved by certain reasons, and the clearer and more conscious these reasons are to us, the more we regard the will as truly our own. Conversely, we somewhat disclaim responsibility where reasons elude us; when we judge the actions of others, we always seek to discover the motives behind their willing, for it seems impossible to us that it should be without reason. With what assurance could we expect an honest and honorable man to act as he ought, if his willing were unmotivated, if he were truly the master "*de vouloir et de non vouloir pas*", as indeterminism claims? Who could guarantee us that the most virtuous man would now not trample upon his virtuous past and turn to dishonesty and malice, were we not to believe that strong motives and firm and precious principles hold him fast upon the path of virtue? It is thus rightly stressed in the critique of indeterminism that it is not merely false, but that, if it were true, we could not conceive a worse gift from nature than a will of such a kind. It would amount to sheer willfulness, utter inconsistency, and incalculability. Determinism holds the advantage that its claim accords with experience, and its proponents never cease to adduce physiological, pathological, sociological and statistical material to prove that the will is indeed bound to motives. Insofar as all this material proves the groundlessness of indeterminism's claim that the will is independent of motives, determinism holds completely. But when it draws from this the conclusion that the will cannot be free, then it commits two mistakes at once: the first is that, like indeterminism, it requires an absolute freedom, which is but an empty word and signifies nothing at all; and this leads to a second mistake, that of proving *too much*, namely that, because the will is bound to motives, it is thereby unfree. Yet according to our understanding of freedom being the absence of certain conditions, while at the same time being bound to certain innate features, or those essential to the thing itself, the question of free will shall not concern the *presence or absence* of motives, but the *quality of present* motives. A will inclined toward the stronger motive does not yet mean that it is unfree, until we come to know what the stronger motive is *like* – from the quality of this motive does the will acquire its *value, which we*

designate as freedom. The question, then, is not whether the will is motivated or not, but how it is motivated.

By what kind of motivation, then, may we call a man free? In the state of nature, man – like all other living beings – is under the influence of instincts and drives; his actions in such a state are predominantly *impulsive*. That is to say: within his consciousness, a certain affective need suddenly flares up, or an idea appears charged with strong feelings, and then, under such pressure, action arises abruptly. We might, in fact, say that action *bursts* from him. The direction of willing is likewise suddenly shifted, in accordance with momentary disposition or motives that happen to be stronger at that time. Yet above this "culture of instinct" arises a higher culture of the will. Certain instincts and drives have faded away in the course of man's development, and in their place came purposive, conscious willing. And then, through practice, the will gained the upper hand, and as they were exercised less, instincts and drives became less reliable – and today they are mostly not as biologically useful to man as they once were, and as they remain useful to animals. It is true that, by conscious willing, man does not attain biological ends with as much assurance as by instincts and drives, but that loss is compensated by a gain. Through the development of spirit, man has first achieved not being under the immediate influence of sensory dispositions and impulsive drives; it is as if he has widened the distance between the first and the last boundary. Namely, affective drives do not immediately and directly lead to action, but rather, other factors intervene between them, sift them, and in accordance with circumstances, attenuate them, hinder them, or allow them to proceed. As a consequence, it becomes possible that, when there suddenly appears in consciousness an idea or a feeling tending toward realization, the separation between the will's inception and its fulfillment allows other motives to enter consciousness and engage those first motives in a struggle in which man adjudicates, chooses, and decides. Imagine a pupil sitting down to study; suddenly, shouts and cheers of his friends playing outside reach his ears. *At that moment*, a pleasant desire will arise in him to join them. Two things are then possible: either his feeling will overpower him, so that he will throw aside his book and rush to join them, *without thinking*, or a *thought* will arise in his consciousness that he ought to finish his homework, for if he does not, he will later face unpleasantness greater than the fleeting value of amusement; within him, a battle of motives will ensue. It has been noted that before the battle of motives ensues, the desire for amusement may prevail, and within the battle itself, the feeling of present pleasure may well prove stronger than the other motives. Not only in children, but likewise in adult human beings, reason often succumbs to feeling, to affect, to passion, and the moment often

prevails over all prior reflection. Yet these cases, however numerous, cannot diminish the value of this *achievement*, that under a rush of motives we can resist the first assault of feeling and temper, and move our willing in a direction that will better accord with *our whole being*. In this way, however, willing loses that naïve and simple immediacy, but ceases to be an isolated product of the moment and becomes related to the *entire personality*. For we become able, for all our willing, not to let only the currently present motives operate, but to call to our aid and counsel all our past and reflection about our future. This is the second gain. Man has thus through spiritual development first gained this much: not to be under the immediate compulsion of the mechanism of the psyche. His deeds cease to be forceful, eruptive acts. Man has gained this: that aside from nature – drive and instinct – there arises within him a new factor – *spirit*. Alongside natural drives, there is now room for rational, and then even ideal demands. He also gains that his willing comes into relation with all that has preceded it, so that in all his volition, the whole man participates – the whole life, all experience, and all reflection. In a word, willing comes into closest connection with the person, and each rightfully calls it his *own*, since he has committed his whole self to it. There are cases in which man, in the spur of the moment or for some time, succumbs to the mechanism of psychological events, or where, owing to a pathological disposition, this happens *permanently*. These cases are indeed true and interesting, yet they can no more be used against our view than one could prove that there are no good machines because there exist bad ones. It is evident that through his reason, man has gained the capacity to resist the mechanism of the psyche, that is to say, to *reasonably employ* his unbridled energies of drive and feeling. We know well that this capacity is not all-powerful in either duration or scope. We know that we may succumb to the rush of drives and momentary affects, that habits may bind this capacity for a longer time, that *heredity* may sometimes greatly restrict it, and in certain cases (in madmen and so-called born criminals) almost entirely eliminate it. But we also know that not all men are burdened with so grievously inherited a condition, and that with sound *upbringing* this capacity can be strengthened and extended. This is sufficient to delineate freedom of the will.

Recall what was noted earlier: that we shall not require freedom of the will to be unmotivated; we shall instead require a motivation which in some respect seems valuable. Accordingly, we shall say that we regard as reasoned motivation, and render as free all action that arises from reasoned and conscious reflection. A man who kills another, say, in a fit of rage or in drunkenness, cannot in a full sense be called free because a strong affect or excessive alcohol has impaired the operation of reason. By contrast, a man who lies in ambush and

kills a neighbor with whom he quarreled a month earlier acts premeditatedly and consciously: he has reflected upon the most suitable place for his deed and its method: how he will carry it out, and doubtless how to conceal it, and he has made all the preparations which, in his judgment, were necessary. That these preparations may not suffice, and that there are men more cunning, wise, and resourceful than he, does not in the least diminish the *freedom* of his willing. In this sense, therefore, each man is free who acts according to reason – for good or ill; the greatest villain and the most virtuous man are, in this sense, equally free, if in their willing, motives of reason are decisive; or, more precisely, *if motives of reason were supreme over all others*. Such freedom can be called *psychological*. Only a step further lies *moral freedom*, which we understand as willing motivated by moral consciousness. In other words, *a man is morally free if moral motives are supreme over all the others*, or a man in whose life moral principles are decisive. A man whose psyche is fully grown can thus be psychologically free to the extent to which all his willing is influenced by *reason*, how much the willing is *of the mind*. To that extent, psychological freedom becomes moral.

We have spoken of the freedom of the will; yet since our *willing*, if it truly be willing, springs from our personality, it would be more apt to speak of the freedom of man. Hence, through spiritual development, man can become free. This needs must be possible for all; yet in truth, the measure of freedom is not equal for all people. There are those whose temperament is naturally pliant and receptive to reason and reflective influence; and then there are others whose temper is harsh, whose drives are too strong, and affects forceful and unrestrained; they defy reason and not seldom take over the agenda. Were we to also consider other innate dispositions, especially those of the pathological kind, these would be the chief natural causes of the inequality of freedom. To this must be added the society in which man comes to maturity, the manner of his upbringing, and the course of his education – these mark a difference in men's spiritual freedom. In judging particular persons and their deeds, all such circumstances are to be considered, so as to arrive at a just verdict of their actions. Yet even a man who, through natural ability and proper education, has attained his capacity for freedom, need not be free in each act; there are moments in which even the most reasonable and the wisest succumb to the rush of temper, and in such a case become unfree. Freedom then is not an inheritance with which nature would endow us, but an achievement for which we must continually engage in strife. *Freedom is not a gift, but a task*. To fulfil this task, nature has not endowed everyone equally. To some, who are burdened by grave illness, chiefly due to the sins of their parents or their own excesses

in Baccho et Venere, this possibility to ascend to a life of spirit has been more or less taken away. To others, because of limited natural gifts and abilities, it is rendered more or less difficult, while only a few ascend with ease into the realm of spirit and the mind. Even those who have attained it must not stand idle with folded hands, lest it slip away – ever must they labor to sustain it within them in every manifestation of life. None were born free, but each was born for freedom – for it is the end of human striving.

On such a conception of freedom, all inner life assumes the character of labor. Within man, nature and spirit contend with one another, and as much as man is capable of directing raw natural energies toward reasoned activity, that is how much freedom he has seized. Such an understanding of freedom does not require that the will should intervene into the course of events over and above the causal chain, like some *deus ex machina*, but requires that the elements of this chain are developed and perfected, thereby transforming mechanical into free activity. Such an understanding of freedom is far removed from willfulness and license, it satisfies moral requirements, and resolves in a simple way the matter of responsibility and accountability; on the other hand, it is not mired by the fallacies of determinism, which takes man to be a mere machine, or a plaything of external circumstances. On this understanding, freedom is compatible with even the strictest lawfulness; it is possible for man – at least as a small factor – to be a source of new spiritual energies, which when put together can from time to time change and improve human life. In this manner, all of humanity takes small steps toward a life of reason; in struggling for his own freedom, man also labors for the freedom of the society in which he lives, and for the freedom of humanity. He paves the way for life to be ordered ever more in accordance with the ends of the mind. And since this is precisely what is distinctive of man, such an understanding could be said to allow man truly to become what he by nature is – namely, man.

Translated by Viktor Ivanković