

Defying Determinism

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It has become part of conventional wisdom today to believe that the once radiant individual is in fact a powerless creature, that the freedoms he once possessed have been eroded, that he has no control over his life. From all sides there is talk of victimization, manipulation, conditioning. People perceive themselves as being at the mercy—not of exploitative human agents—but of blank, inscrutable forces described as "the system," "the establishment," "technology," or what is summed up as "technique." Although these forces are assumed to be impersonal and not in any degree supernatural, the prevalent mood seems to be a wintry one in many places, much like the mood permeating *King Lear*. Gloucester gives it expression in that play when he says: "As flies to wanton boys we are to the Gods. They kill us for their sport." When I look around and listen these days, I suspect much the same sense of being pushed and pulled by forces the individual can neither understand nor control. There follows from that much the same feeling which accompanies a determinist point of view—or the belief that everything in the universe is governed by causal laws, that for everything that happens there are conditions such that (given those conditions) nothing else could have happened. The conclusion is then drawn that the individual has no meaningful capacity to will not to do something, not (like the speaker in Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken") to take the other road.

There are numerous instances of charges and counter-charges that presume the possibility of determinism and implicitly invalidate free will. We need only recall the college students' talk of being processed (against their will) to fill slots in the corporate structure, treated as mere "objects," barred from independent thought. We need only think of the critics who describe compulsory education as a "universal trap," call the school a "jail" or a social machine that brainwashes the young to the end of perpetuating itself. There are, as well, the proponents of deschooling, who describe programs of educational development as consumerism aimed at making robots out of the "schooled." There is Herbert Marcuse writing about the ways in which people are manipulated into "false consciousness" under the rule of "monopolistic media—themselves the mere instruments of economic and political power. . . ." There is Jacques Ellul describing a "technique" that is self-generating and self-augmenting, enforcing adaptation to mass society, thrusting the individual into life as a "mass man."

And there is, of course, B. F. Skinner, whose *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* purports to expose freedom as an illusion and dignity as a sham. Unlike the modern Jeremiahs (Goodman, Marcuse, Ellul, and the rest) who are issuing warnings, about the threats to autonomy, Skinner denies the very existence of autonomy and justifies what is driving others to despair. He does so blandly, optimistically, in the spirit of nineteenth-century small-town morality. His object is to shape a vision of a Utopia that can be achieved through deliberate behavior control, some thing he would not seriously propose if he believed in free will. Some reviewers have called his arguments logically unassailable. Some cultural dissidents have said that Skinner is merely articulating what everyone knows to be true. After all, they say, everybody is talking about the technological and chemical conditioning of behavior. There is evidence of electronic supervision, of data banks for the dossiers of private citizens. Do not these provide opportunities for extensive behavior controls? It is not at all inconceivable, they say, that we are heading towards complete thought control.

But those concerned about moral responsibility, choosing, and self-initiated learning are both rebellious and alarmed. What alarms me most is the ease with which people agree that freedom is a fantasy and that we can somehow do without the postulate of freedom even as we ask individuals to be "good." How do we hold individuals responsible if we cannot assume, in particular cases, that they did what they did with the sense that they could have done otherwise? The recollection of our long acquiescence in the Vietnamese war returns to me: the refusal on the part of so many to

believe that they, as citizens, could intervene in the long, apparently mechanical sequence of cause and effect relationships that seemed to determine what was happening. There was no stopping it, they appeared to be saying; there was a necessity involved; and the war was, by its very nature, out of control.

Then I think of Daniel Ellsberg, who (as Peter Schrag has put it) seems to "symbolize the conversion of that generation of people who always had been ready, as he says, 'to obey the boss'—and who would never feel the same way about the boss again." I think of Charles Reich's "The Limits of Duty" (in *The New Yorker*, June 19y 1971). "The central reality," Reich wrote, "is that evil today is the product of our system of organization and our technology, and that it occurs because personal responsibility and personal awareness have been obliterated by a system deliberately designed to do just that—eliminate or minimize the human element and insure the supremacy of the system." (p. 52) He spoke of a neglect of our moral resources and about the need for full participation by each individual. We can no longer afford, he said, "to be a people who unthinkingly serve." I would emphasize "unthinkingly." Neither he nor Ellsberg is calling for anarchy. Both are simply asking us to think what we are doing, to take responsibility, to refuse—blindly—to accede.

Is that too much to ask? Some will say, "But we can't help what we are. We have been molded this way, shaped this way by our genetic structures, our environments!" Others will say, "Mea culpa—we have been schooled; we have been conditioned; we are merely products of the system. What do you expect us to do?" But are we truly products—victims? Are we like the characters in Emile Zola's novels? Zola believed that their behavior could be totally and "experimentally" explained in terms of heredity and environment. He saw Etienne, Gervaise, Nana, and the other members of the doomed Rougon-Macquart family as tragic products of a social milieu, fixed forever in their weaknesses and their stations in society. He was thought of as a great reform novelist; yet he wrote that Nana was descended "from four or five generations of drunkards, and tainted in her blood by a cumulative inheritance of misery and drink. . . ." She was "rotten," Zola wrote, because she had been shaped by the slums and pavements of Paris; she could never escape what she was. The only hope was to do something about the slums and pavements, but Nana could never be saved. Are we like Theodore Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, the passive victim of socioeconomic and biological determinism, who lacked the strength needed for self-control and so murdered Roberta Alden, not out of will but necessity? You may remember how easy it is to understand and forgive Clyde Griffiths. After all, he could not help what he was. . .

SKINNER

As B.F. Skinner sees it, the variables in Nana's and Clyde's environments could have been manipulated in such a way that their "good" habits would have been reinforced. The trouble was that their behavior was not properly controlled. For him, the concept of freedom developed over time mainly on the basis of men's experiences in turning away from negative or aversive reinforcers (the things that irritated, injured, obstructed them), particularly those due to the actions of other people. The literature of freedom, he writes, has helped people refuse submission to aversive conditions; but the difficulty is that it has "dealt with the problem in terms of states of mind and feelings." (He is not concerned with, nor does he believe in, the existence of inner states. He is a behaviorist, after all. To speak of anyone's "states of mind and feelings" is, for him, to speak meaninglessly.) The point is that behavioral processes, not a will to be free, account for the struggle for freedom. Our hope lies, Skinner says, not in freeing men from control but in perfecting those techniques of control and reinforcement in the social environment which will induce human beings to live peaceably and productively together. The notion of human autonomy must be sacrificed, since it is the environment that is responsible for behavioral repertoires, not human choosing, certainly not free will. Human dignity, Skinner believes, only means that people are given credit for what they do, when what they do is not done boastfully and conspicuously, or when what they do cannot be easily explained. The literature of dignity "may oppose advances in technology, including a technology of behavior, because [the advances] destroy chances to be admired, and [the

literature may oppose] a basic analysis because it offers an alternative explanation of behavior for which the individual himself has previously been given credit." The challenge on the part of those who raise the question of technology and the ends for which it is to be used can simply be answered "by intensifying the contingencies which generate behavior for the good of others or by pointing to previously neglected individual gains, such as those conceptualized as security, order, health, wealth, and wisdom."

Now the point is that behaviorism cannot be disproved empirically. I know of no one who has demonstrated empirically that Skinner is wrong. If someone tries, Skinner can always summon up an answer having to do with the effect of aversive factors upon the challenger, the ways in which he has been reinforced, or the influence upon him of certain factors in the culture, which themselves have been manmade. Nevertheless, every time someone addresses himself or herself to other people—whether in politics, education, or art—and tries to arouse them to make choices, he or she is dissenting from this attitude. I am dissenting from it by writing an article about "defying determinism." But all the dissenter can do is to refer to his or her own experience, his or her own consciousness of himself or herself as a reflecting and willing being in the world. Many scholars, like the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, may wax sardonic at this and tell the poor dissenter that the idea of will is like the idea of a "ghost in the machine." To talk about it, they may say, is to assume the existence of an entirely private mind, separated from the body, a mind where certain invisible performances take place, including the performance of willing. This, the dissenter may be told, is not only unverifiable; it is utterly unnecessary.

None of the answers the dissenter can give is absolute. One is that, ever since the time of the great classic philosophers, men have talked about voluntary action, about a faculty—eventually called "will"—intermediate between reason and desire. There has been a general agreement through much of history that the faculty of the will is self-determining, uncaused by outside factors, and never susceptible to empirical proof. It can only be immediately known by the individual, but it is what makes possible acts which are purposeful and intentional. It is what makes possible, too, the ability to say no, to refuse, to rebel, to choose among different values and courses of action. A free act is voluntary; we can act if we choose to do so. If there were no such faculty, how would we recognize what St. Augustine, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the others were talking about when they discussed "will" and especially "free will"?

There remains—despite Skinner and Ryle—the existential experience of being able to exert one's will freely, of being able to choose not to do as well as to do certain things. As long as there is a conviction that certain things might have been left undone, such experience is confirmed. It may be necessary, of course, to respond to skeptics with a Dostoevskian refusal to be a "piano key." (The Underground Man, for example, says: "You see, gentlemen, reason is an excellent thing, there's no disputing that, but reason is nothing but reason and satisfies only the rational side of man's nature, while will is a manifestation of the whole life, that is, of the whole human life including reason and all the impulses. And although our life, in the manifestation of it, is often worthless, yet it is life and not simply extracting square roots.")

For the determinist, uniform laws govern all of nature, including living beings. These laws are rationally connected with one another; and thus every event can be viewed as causally determined by some prior event. The person who believes in free choice argues that the very insertion of consciousness into the world opens possibilities for events which are not predictable and therefore not compelled or determined. The individual human being, involved in changing and often novel situations, may act on impulse, out of passion or caprice. He may be aware, or think he is aware, of some contingency he could not be expected to perceive. Whenever such things happen, the presumably orderly course of events cannot but be disturbed. The underlying "indeterminacy" is exposed.

Like others who believe in the existence of free will, I would not deny causation. Nor can I, in all good faith, deny the limits which contain our possibilities, the necessity implicit in everyone's existential situation. Whitehead once wrote of the "massive habits of physical nature, its iron laws"

which "determine the scene for the sufferings of man." There are, as well, peculiar limitations in particular lives, of which we are all aware. Those who assert the reality of free will know that choosing takes place against—and is limited by—a life, a background of social maladjustment, disease, poverty, as well as the "iron laws" that include the law of man's mortality. Insisting that, in spite of life's limitations, free choice is not illusory, they say that causes may well exist but do not, in every case, compel. A young man in the ghetto may be hungry; he may suffer a terrible rage at bigotry or maltreatment; but he is not compelled to steal or mug or resort to drugs (although, if he did, we could easily identify the causes for his acts). A young woman, reared by sensitive, understanding parents and teachers, is not therefore compelled to remain in some suitable environment and realize her potentialities, although—if she became a great success—we could easily explain why. She may, like the Underground Man, deliberately choose to live in a shiftless way injurious to herself. Choice, writes Dostoyevsky, may be quite rational and appropriate "within bounds." But often "choice is utterly and stubbornly opposed to reason and . . . and . . . do you know that that, too, is profitable, sometimes even praiseworthy?" The point is that, for all the predictions that might reasonably have been made, the girl was not compelled to do the proper thing when she graduated from school. As hippie, factory worker, pacifist, terrorist, or hitchhiker she could demonstrate daily that she was free not to do what she ought to have done.

DETERMINISM

Michael Scriven makes a distinction between "predictive determinism" and "explanatory determinism." He says that those who emphasize the significance of free will and choosing are prone to say that choices are essentially unpredictable. Admitting the importance of choice in determining outcomes and admitting too that the person who makes the choice usually cannot predict it with any certainty, he says that predictability, while possible in principle, is not possible in practice. This is because choices are determined by such a variety of variables, most of which cannot be foreseen. Only at the end of a life, in a very careful overview of a person's history, can the crucial variables and determinants be identified, as in psychoanalysis. But even such a careful study would not enable anyone (a psychoanalyst or anyone else) to predict, in every detail, the person's future behavior. Only if the environment were severely restricted, as in Skinner's *Walden Two*, could prediction of this sort become really efficient. More realistic, however, is explanatory determinism. We can assume, on a particular occasion, that human behavior has followed a particular model (Skinnerian, say, or Piagetian); and we can explain instances of that behavior according to the model. The explanation may shed light upon the person or persons involved and upon the model, but it will not eliminate their freedom to choose. Nor will it change the fact that human beings (like Eldridge Cleaver, Helen Keller, Franklin D. Roosevelt) have the capacity to frustrate predictions—and most especially when they are aware of the predictions being made.

A great deal depends upon vantage point. Looking back in time from the present, most individuals see a necessity in their past lives. Very often they see a fatality. What has happened almost always seems necessary: because it happened, it had to happen, although no one may have realized it at the time. Thomas Wolfe, tracing Eugene Gant's ancestry at the beginning of *Look Homeward, Angel*, writes:

Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the life that ended yesterday in Texas. The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock, and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern because a London cutpurse went unhung. Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years. The minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death, and every minute is a window on all time.

"Touched by that dark miracle of chance," Wolfe writes, it is nonetheless what men call destiny. If an Englishman named Gilbert Gaunt (who later changed his name to Gant) had not come to the United States, if he had not had a son Oliver who was drawn southward by the sight of the rebels marching to Gettysburg during the Civil War, if Oliver had not lost his first wife and married Eliza

Pentland, Eugene Gant would not have existed; and, for Eugene Gant, that would have been unthinkable. And yet Oliver Gant could easily have stayed in Pennsylvania if he had wanted to; he could have ridden in another direction when he came to North Carolina and never come to Altamont where Eliza lived. Like every other human being, he lived in a world of contingencies; what he did was never logically necessary. Yet, for his son Eugene (who could not imagine not being alive), all was in evitable when he looked backwards in time.

If the past is fixed and in some sense "necessary" from the vantage point of the present, the future is not; and willing or choosing runs forward to the future. As a teacher, I deal in projections, in possibilities, as do my students. My preoccupation may be with the tasks my students will some day be able to perform, with the achievements at which they will arrive. It may be with their mastery of a discipline, or with the ways in which they gain perspectives upon their own life-worlds. Whatever my concern, however, it is directed at the future, at what is not yet; and there is no way for me to subject that future to empirical test. By each of my actions, by each of my efforts to move my students towards inquiry and self-consciousness, I assert my own freedom; and, implicitly, I affirm that choosing is significant for myself as well as for those who are learning to learn. If this were not the case, I could scarcely justify intervening in the endless chain of cause and effect, except by saying that I was going to insure that what was meant to happen did indeed occur or by saying that I was going to institute a new sequence of causes and effects through deliberate and mechanical reinforcement.

There are so many examples in literature of people who feel themselves manipulated by an incomprehensible system—and who feel, at the same time, uneasy, as if somehow they could have had something to say. One of these examples is to be found in Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, that strange work described as dealing with two "mini-Hamlets in limbo." The two characters, so incidental in Shakespeare's play, here live at the fringes of the tragedy we know as *Hamlet* and never understand what is going on or why. The story of *Hamlet* exists like a large inscrutable universe, and their roles have been as signed. "We can move, of course," says Guildenstern, "change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current. . . ." "They had it in for us, didn't they?" says Rosencrantz, "Right from the beginning. Who'd have thought that we were so important?" And, at the end, when death has come, and Rosencrantz cries, "We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?"—Guildenstern reviews it all once more: "Our names shouted in a certain dawn—a message—a summons. . . . There must have been a moment, at the beginning, when we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it."

And, indeed, I believe this is the point. There is a moment when we could have said no—always such a moment, if we believe we possess free will, if we believe we are always in a state of becoming. Jean-Paul Sartre says that the human being "is not ready-made at the start. In choosing his ethics, he makes himself, and force of circumstances is such that he cannot abstain from choosing. . . ." It is never easy to admit one's full freedom, to defy either fate or determinism (and give up the excuses each one provides). We are like Orestes in Sartre's *The Flies*, many of us, as we attempt to break with the crowd, with conditioning, as we insist on the possibility of subjectively experienced consciousness, of free will. Orestes, having come home to Argos to avenge his father's death at last, defies Zeus and the lulling effect of the natural world Zeus has created, and the bland forgiveness of the sky. "Obedient to your will," Orestes says, "my youth rose up before me and pleaded with me like a girl who fears her lover will forsake her. That was the last time, the last, I saw my youth, Suddenly, out of the blue, freedom crashed down on me and swept me off my feet. Nature sprang back, my youth went with the wind, and I knew my self alone, utterly alone in the midst of this well-meaning little universe of yours. I was like a man who's lost his shadow. And there was nothing left in heaven, no right or wrong, nor anyone to give me orders. . . . I must blaze my trail. For I, Zeus, am a man, and every man must find his own way."

To defy determinism, then, is to become fully conscious of one's freedom—with all its risks, with all its dread responsibilities. It is to break with the crowd, to know one's own inwardness, to be wide-awake with respect to the world around and its "iron laws," its limitations, its causes which need not

compel. And, perhaps above all, it is to Jive so as not to say at the end, "There must have been a moment. . ." One must seize the moment, choose the road.