

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

VOL. XLI (No. 2)

FEBRUARY, 1927

(No. 849)

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The Open Court Publishing Company

Wieboldt Hall, 337 East Chicago Ave., CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Per copy, 20 cents (1 shilling). Yearly, \$2.00 (in the U.P.U., 9s. 6d.)

Entered as Second-Class Matter March 26, 1887, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under Act of March 3, 1879
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Cornell Studies in Philosophy

Published Under the General Editorial Supervision
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"INDIAN DREAM JOURNEY TO SPIRIT WORLD"

Frontispiece to *The Open Court*

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FREEDOM

BY SIDNEY HOOK

OF FREEDOM, one can say what St. Augustine said of time. "If no one asks me what it is, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not." (*Confessions* Book XI, XIV). Yet if we know how freedom is attained we are content that we know something of what it is. He who refuses to make a quest until he has a bullet proof definition in hand from which he can *deduce* the object of his quest can never proceed far, for either he is pretending to discover what he knows already or else raises problems of how what is both novel and valid can be inferred without logical sleight-of-hand from what is familiar. But it is the method and manner of the discussion rather than its matter which lead to confusion in philosophy. The deepest source of this confusion can be traced to a tendency to convert the *distinctions* and differences we find in subject matter into *separations*, then to pose the question of how these separations can be brought together and end by hopelessly confounding the situation in an attempt to deduce one from the other. And yet our *understanding* of natural and social events overtly expressed in our empirical practices is not beset with the difficulties that oftentimes attend our *explanation* of them. Despite Hegel we never really deduce categories from one another. We discover mind in an order of things and bodies, and yet we know that minds are not bodies, colors in a series of vibrations and yet colors are not vibrations, lines in points and points in lines and yet lines are not points, thoughts in an order of words and yet words are not thoughts, and so on. The world with its latencies and possibilities is given once and for all time and in its growth and movement there are revealed different dimensions and

aspects which are incommensurable and therefore irreducible. One born blind does not know what red or green is merely because he knows its vibration number. He may become a physicist but he can never paint a landscape. These dimensions, stripping the word of its spatial sense, are not created by consciousness but are objective discoveries, like the play of light and color upon a mountain peak, a temple or a scaffold, all of which have distinct organizations in stone and straw of their own. When it is said that the world is given once and for all time—a phrase of Mach's which has provoked bitter criticism—the statement is not intended as a proposition in logic, but as a presupposition of natural human behavior. It is true that a great many things have been discovered from suppositions and hypothesis of what the world is not, but these conceptions like guesses on a more homely plane, transfer and attribute the characters of the world discovered to segments and regions of the world to be explored.

These observations stated baldly may be accepted as so many commonplaces until it is understood to what use we intend to put them. For following their lead we say that freedom is a fact discovered in knowledge of an order of necessity or mechanism; or that man wins or finds freedom in a world in which he is confronted by necessity. Such a statement seems to outrage the sensibilities of the tender minded who unwarrantably conclude that an equation has been drawn between two conceptions commonly taken to be contradictory and who feel that there is something logically and ethically suspicious in locating human freedom in a mechanical order obviously indifferent to human hopes and desires. Then without further excuse we are assailed with a great deal of talk about the *will* being free, about psychic indeterminism and mental teleology.

Now the so-called 'problem' of freedom, as I understand it, is not primarily an inquiry for psychology but an inquiry for ethics. It is not a question of whether the *will* is free but whether the mind is free, or in other words, it is a question of whether man and man's *acts* in terms of which we read his mind, are free. It is very difficult to understand the view which holds that man's freedom begins where natural law ends, that the realm of freedom is outside the realm of physical necessity and law. If that were the case such freedom would be utterly unintelligible. For consider, what would freedom mean

in a world where there is no uniformity, measure or ordered sequence—what could the free will or free mind or free man effect or accomplish if the objects and things through which that freedom expressed itself had no intrinsic order in virtue of which they could be transformed, used or enjoyed? In the absence of mechanics how would what is called 'free will' differ from the fevered fancies of the delirious or the extravagant conceits of the insane? As an empirical fact it can be shown that when the mind or will—no matter whose—expresses its choice it does not intend to open the floodgates to gay disorders and chaos but intends rather to introduce additional order—to significantly determine and stabilize the flow of things so that its power might be potentialized for future use and appreciation.

Nor is the rejoinder that the will is free to choose between the necessity of one order and the necessity of another any more intelligible. First, it flies in the face of modern science which shows not only that the will can be directly controlled by suggestion but that together with our emotional life it is functionally dependent upon a certain physiological state of glands, nerves, toxins, etc. Second, if it be held that a man's acts are independent of the facts of heredity, free from motive, free from environment, free from character.—it follows that his acts must be free from his very self—for all of these factors define the self. He who denies this inference is committed to the view that the self is a spook or ghost lodged somewhere in the back of the brain playing hide and seek with the scientist's scalpel. Aristotle knew better. But at any rate the utter divorce between character and free acts gives rise to a host of absurdities and confuses the theory of responsibility and punishment in whose interest it was elaborated and defended. For if nothing about 'X' is the cause of his act how can he be said to be the author of it? Those who believe that because every volition or act can be tied down to a uniquely determined movement of brain molecules man is thereby deprived of his freedom might just as well say that a man is a slave because he undergoes an operation in order to save his life or preserve his health and that the only time he can *freely* submit to the surgeon's knife is when there is no reason in the world why he should be operated on at all. So much for the psychology of the matter entered into to remove certain preliminary misconceptions.

"Where then does freedom come in?" interject those who believe

that the discovery of structures or invariant law in nature closes the question with an emphatic negative. The answer is simple. Just because I have clear purposes and can realize them I say that freedom is a fact—a fact in social life and experience—discovered wherever knowledge of natural and emotional necessities is present. When ever there is a confusion of purposes, whenever we do not know what we want or do not know what we mean, we are unfree. This seems to be a somewhat cavalier and paradoxical solution of the problem for I am saying that just because a man's purposes, aspirations, acts or will, if you please, are meddled and inconsistent—just because they are not unambiguously *determined* man is unfree. This is not or should not be news in the realm of mind. Aristotle in Book III of his *Nicomachean Ethics* has enumerated in another connection the limitations which a man is free *from* when he is said to be free at all. They are (1) the physical compulsion of some external force and (2) ignorance of the circumstances in which an act is performed. Insofar as the first may possibly be affected by power or control which follows upon knowledge, it merges into the second.

Knowledge, then, of ourselves and of the world without is the key to freedom for it tells us what we are and that we can be no other than what we are. Freedom is the consequence of this knowledge revealed and attested to by our everyday activities. A musical virtuoso is free to play only when he has acquired a mastery of the instrument and its technique; a mechanic or artisan is free in action and in thought only when he is sufficiently familiar with the organization of his machines and the character of his problem and materials to make application effective. Self-knowledge is in so far forth freedom because he who clearly understands himself is not hampered by irresolution, doubt or indecision for like Socrates in Santayana's *Dialogues in Limbo* he "knows his own mind, and thoroughly discerns what he means and what he loves." He who knows not his own mind, the sources of his ideals and the direction in which they seek fulfillment is wasted by a torturing fever of desire, a restless fretting and striving for a past that can never be recalled and a future that can never be realized. "He who talks of freedom and excludes thought," says Hegel, "knows not what he says."

Freedom of mind implies an acceptance—an acceptance of what knowledge reveals concerning the necessary order of things. This

acceptance is not the resignation of one who baffled and bewildered in a world too complex for his wits represses his instincts and desires in a severe asceticism; it is not the acceptance of the camel or the Christian who take their burden kneeling; but it is an acceptance that is at the same time an affirmation—an affirmation not of the world's *goodness* but of the world's *necessity*—an affirmation which leaves the mind sane, unperturbed by illusion and anguish. When the utter inexorableness of law comes home to one, revolt cannot stir the heart, desire for the impossible burns itself out into cold ash. We do not fume and fuss because we have no eyes in the back of our head and we do not hold meetings of protest against the summer's heat and the winter's cold. Only he who accepts the rainstorm is free to go about in it with an umbrella.

It is sometimes thought that if all of life's activities are determined by the movement of 'atoms in the void' then every counsel of wisdom is vain and every increase in knowledge is superfluous, availing little to influence the course of events. This clearly does not follow. My health at any moment is completely determined by the state of my body and yet the knowledge of medicine may enable me to develop a stronger and healthier body. We may be so built that emotions of one sort or another continually affect the mind. But by understanding the mechanism which conditions the disturbance we may cause a particular emotion to be displaced by another by submitting ourselves to an external stimulus which sets up within us a stronger reaction. By substituting one stimulus for another we succeed in making emotions yield to others in modifying their particular expressions. Pugnacity for instance, can never be argued or beaten out of a man. But the situation may be so presented as to make it give way to stronger emotions of pity or love. As a form of emotional disturbance pugnacity is neither good nor bad, but becomes such as its definite expressions affect interests and desires. Knowledge of how these irrepressible pugnacious tendencies operate may lead us to find different fields for them to assert themselves and suggest different ends to set before them. Its operation, however, is none the less chemically determined whether we find it good or bad. Knowledge enables us to rule our passions by guiding them not by suppressing them. A great deal of the psychology of sublimation taken as a rational therapeutic and not as a psychoanalytic myth is

contained in Parts 3-5 of Spinoza's *Ethics*. But, as we shall see, because all of our acts and emotions are determined it does not mean that they are *predestined* or fated. Of course the difference between a free act and an act that is not free does not necessarily lie in a difference between the kinds of action performed. A wise man and a fool may vote the same ticket or go to the same church. Some have therefore argued that since every choice is a value judgment, existence being neutral to *all* values, every chooser is equally free in the realm in which that choosing goes on. If this is what is meant by freedom, one may very well grant it and stop to ask what important distinction is clarified besides that of fact and value. To close the question here is surely to overlook the tremendous difference which *judgments* of fact or the possession of knowledge make in their manifold effects upon the judgments of value.

Freedom, then, like personality, virtue, honor and most other things worth having, is not a natural endowment but a conventional or ethical acquisition—something won through knowledge and analysis. If we may reverse the traditional interpretation of the Bible story we should say that Adam in his ignorance and innocence could not have performed a free moral act in eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Only after having partaken of the fruit and acquired knowledge can Adam in any significant sense be said to have become free—as free as his Creator for whom the possession of knowledge is the sceptre and writ of divinity and hence of freedom. "And the Lord God said, 'Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.'"

At this point those who fear that every use of the word freedom conceals a hidden theology interpose with a final and 'crushing' objection. Granted, they say, that so-called freedom is knowledge of the union of the temper and pulse of our life with the nature of things is it not true that that knowledge itself is determined by the movement of 'atoms in the void' and therefore is no more an expression of freedom than ignorance and error which are also the result of matter in motion? It is foolish to respond that knowledge of the dependence of knowledge upon some kind of molecular change is freedom for it is promptly pointed out that knowledge of such dependence is itself conditioned by a brain state. And so the game of shuttlecock and battledore so popular in contemporary discussion of

the problem, is on. It can only proceed because of the fruitless and self-defeating practice of calling one another's subject matter into question instead of following an empirical lead. In one case a certain physiological state or configuration of atoms is called into question by being reduced to terms of structure instead of being examined in respect to purport. A picture may be defined in terms of pigments and oils but it is not thereby understood. Perception of the conditions of knowledge is not perception of its meaning.

Therefore to those who affirm in the discussion of freedom that knowledge itself is determined by certain physical characters and chemical secretions we say, "Quite true but you are shifting the issue and calling subject matter into question by investigating the *antecedents* of knowledge instead of its *consequences*. And in the consequences of knowledge lies *freedom*." Knowledge of ourselves and of nature—of its fixities and uncertainties, enables us to control and predict. Where we can control and guide and renounce—even if it be no more than putting on a new face before necessity, there is freedom found. When joy is consequent upon the complete understanding of necessity then freedom is intensified. Once knowledge is present and the impossibility or uncertainty of volition or choice between any two alternatives is not to be attributed to a freedom of indifference, better called paralysis, of will and impulse but either to physical constraint or to the objective indeterminateness of the situation, as when we say "We do not *know* what to do," or "We *can* not do what we know should be done." As knowledge gives out the rational will falters and becomes free again only as we act on the presumptive probabilities of knowledge relations which hold of the past.

This is not denying that the antecedents of knowledge are the conditions of freedom. It is maintaining, however, to return to the argument of the opening paragraph, that freedom is not its conditions any more than color is its vibrations. It may very well be that knowledge may not be completely attainable because of some physical or physiological lack or defect, yet striving for it will develop to the full those potentialities for knowledge within us. Reaching rock bottom we say that he whose 'bodily complexion' makes impossible the attainment of knowledge is not free and can never become free. He is enslaved by nature.

We can put this another way and gladden the hearts of those

who pride themselves on their scientific bias. A life of human freedom is one determined by knowledge; a life of human bondage is one not so determined. But it must be borne in mind that we have not destroyed the distinction although we have made it more difficult to understand, for the significance shifts from the word 'determined' which is the same in both cases, to the different phrases which qualify it. Whenever we limit ourselves to fundamental description—and this is our business as metaphysicians—no explanation can wipe out distinctions in subject matter discovered as a matter of fact.

Although human freedom depends upon a natural order, the natural order does not determine or confer upon itself significance. That is to say, the values which arise in the possession and exercise of freedom can never be derived from the order of the domain in which that freedom is a fact. He who sees the whole of things may idly watch its play as a spectator, may participate with zest in its movement as an actor, or may with the power of a divine playwright pull down the curtain upon the living. For the free man there is no cosmic compulsion to live or die, to be a saint or a scoundrel, to pray or to scoff. But in whatever he will do he will be true to his own nature. For him the compulsion follows *after* a basic choice but follows *from* the consequences of the choice in an ordered world. If he chooses to live in society then the compulsion arises from the nature of society. But the foresight of the free man marks out and accepts these compulsions as conditions so that although their full force is felt they do not chafe or sting. Unless as life is dear to us there is nothing to prevent us from taking fire as a patch of sunlight or as a raiment of many colors. And when we embrace illusions and hug our dreams to our heart we know that we do so only on nature's suffrance hedged in and confined by its laws and humors.

It was said above that the human freedom we have discovered is in no sense a fatalism. The *means* which a free man selects or adopts to realize his aims and ends follow from his character, from his working *materials* and *environment*. But from the viewpoint of fatalism—whether it be the popular or classical conception, no matter what a man's character is, no matter what he does or how much or how little he knows, the end to which he is predestined will be fulfilled, 'will-he nill-he'. Fatalism involves the same negation or an order in nature and in man as does radical indeterminism.

Freedom as a way of life finally is not unrelated to the metaphysics of nature. If the whole of existence is an absolute mechanism, completely and irreversibly ordered, then complete and absolute freedom is within human reach for freedom becomes a direct function of understanding and insight into nature and human nature. However in a world which seems to present a cross grained pattern of law and chance, freedom although more precious is more difficult to attain. Unpredictable leaps and jumps in nature set at nought calculations based upon the assumption of unbroken continuous law. Says Santayana “. . . the most visionary of mystics . . . knows how invisibly fly the shafts of Apollo: let but the lightest of them cut the knot of the heart, and suddenly there is an end of eloquence and policy and mighty determination. He knows that it suffices for the wind to change and all the fleets of thought will forget their errand and sail for another haven.”

Therefore in an open universe, spiced with chance and alive with possibilities, a life of human freedom is not only an organized enterprise, it is a spirited adventure as well.