CHAPTER VII

FREE WILL AND RATIONAL DETERMINATION

VII

In this concluding chapter we wish to gather the different strands of thought put forth in the previous ones together. We have said that any act to be morally significant must be free. Man, as a moral agent, looks on himself as one who has this prerogative over all other beings that he fixes his ends for himself. Will is the power in man that decides his conduct in relation to values; it is his power to choose. Moral values are essentially bound up with freedom of will. As Nicolai Hartmann says that questions of moral values are only one half of the ethical problem and the other half is the metaphysics of moral acts in the centre of which stands the problem of the freedom of will.[1] A man is not simply one who is marked by the value, he is also looked upon to be the originator of its fulfilment or of its failure. To elucidate the meaning of the 'originator', I quote from Hartmann :

> By this origination we mean something quite definite : whoever does wrong could just as well have acted rightly; whoever tells a lie or breaks his word could nevertheless have done otherwise; he was not constrained; he was in a position to tell the truth and to keep his promise. And only in so far as this was possible for him is there any question as to a real lie or a breaking of his word. In the same way, whoever does right, whoever speaks the truth, and so on, is only in so far actually just and truthful as it was possible for him to do otherwise.[2]

If an agent's will is not free, that is to say, it what an agent does, does under some compulsion, he or she could not be said to be responsible for his or her acts. No moral value would be ascribable to the agent in that

case. In a word, the whole significance of morality will be lost, if freedom is an illusion.

But some philosophers do not care to ask questions about the very foundation of the moral institution and the controversy regarding free will arises. The problem of freedom is grounded in human nature. On the one hand we believe that (at least sometimes) to choose whether to act in a certain way or not; we believe that we are responsible for so acting or refraining from action; we believe that for those parts of our history which do not lie within our choice, we can not be held responsible. On the other hand, we believe that nature is uniform, that whatever happens results from and can be explained by a set of causes and conditions and in particular that our actions result from our inherited character as modified by environment. The problem of freedom of will may be stated as follows :

> Are decisions and choices in principle capable of being caused and capable of causing actions? Are actions identical with sets of events that in principle can be predicted on the basis of antecedent conditions and relevant causal law? If an action is more than a set of events, does this preclude causal determination of actions?[3]

The controversy in the history of philosophy has been seen differently by different philosophers and theorists. The issue has been said to be between either of the following :

1. Rationalism and voluntarism,
2. Mechanism and teleology,
3. Empirical view and a priorist view,
4. Heteronomy and autonomy.

But the most widely accepted view that cuts across all the above is the issue between determinism and indeterminism.

The scientific thesis of determinism is that any event whatsoever is an instance of some law of nature. A famous and very graphic formulation of thesis by Laplace is that given a knowledge of state of universe at some date, it is in principle possible to predict all the subsequent history of the universe. The scientific theory of determinism is inspired by the development of physical science (although it may not be acceptable to the very recent developments of science). But the general theory of determinism is as old as philosophy; the rise of physical science only prompted philosophers to revise somewhat the content of deterministic theories to which they were already accustomed. The philosophical or the more general theory of determinism may be then stated as the view that every event, including human choices and volitions, is caused by other events and happens as an effect or result of these other events.[4]

The essence of ethical determinism is then the thesis that will is not free, choice is illusory and that how we act is determined. Nicolai Hartmann writes that ancient thinkers take freedom for granted as something self evident and that is why they do not pass through much metaphysical difficulties in this regard.[5] True that ancient thinkers are not disturbed by the problem of free will, but what I have observed is that they also did not combat determinism, at least till Aristotle came on the scene. We have noted earlier, in Chapter I that the age of myths and tragedies is fully governed by determinism. The laws of fate (fate ≡ nature) leave no room for freedom. This fatalism influences the early Greek thinkers like Diodorus Cronus and some others, referred to by Aristotle as 'the Megarians' who developed the school of logical determinism. It has been observed that the

views of logical determinists "were associated by the ancients with the idea of fate, an idea which has, however, the same implication as certain forms of determinism with respect to human freedom."[6] Socrates thinks that every man always chooses what seems to him best and that no man can set something as the object of choice that seems evil to him. Plato holds the similar view that no man does wrong knowingly, that is no man can choose anything what he knows to be bad. Hence, the doctrine that virtue is knowledge and vice is ignorance. It is possible to interpret this ethical intellectualism as a theory of determinism—determination of will by what is good.[7] But, if determinism is true, question arises as to whether it is right to hold an agent responsible for his actions, and to praise or blame him and possibly to reward or punish him.

Aristotle, we have seen earlier, although a teleologist like his ancestors, rejects ethical determinism. He is a teleologist because he maintains that we act towards a fixed goal and that is *eudaɛ́monia* (happiness). He is a champion of freedom for he realises that sometimes man's desires or appetites are in conflict with his reason and man exercises his freedom by choosing the means towards a fixed end. This, Aristotle calls 'deliberate choice'. The Epicureans are the prominent physical determinists of the past maintaining that everything, including man is composed of minute and impenetrable atoms and thus, human behaviour too is reducible to and understandable in terms of motions of atoms. But, by assuming that atoms have the power of occasional spontaneous motion, they allowed some amount of freedom to human behaviour. Among the moderns, the view of empiricists are considered as examples of determinism. Of them, Hobbes is said to be a physical determinist and Hume a psychological one. But these philosophers do not reject human

freedom in any sense rather they have their own concept of freedom. "Hobbes and Hume were determinists and they needed a concept of freedom that could be reconciled with determinism. Such a reconciliatory view says that a man who can do what he wills to do is free, no matter how his will may have been causally determined."[8] Hume believes that men are both free and all their actions are causally determined. He maintains that the problem of free will is only verbal in character. We know that for Hume, causation is constant conjunction and there is no necessary connection between causes and their effects. Causes do not compel the occurrence of their effects, they only precede them. To say that human actions are caused only means that they are constantly conjoined with some preceding events. No one would contradict that certain human actions have always been associated with certain motives. Far from saying that no human actions are free, Hume holds the opposite view that it is the very nature of a free action that it springs from the motive of the agent. He then defines freedom as being able to act according to the determination of one's will.[9] Hume's view has more impact and influence in our times than his own. The advent of Darwinism in nineteenth century greatly strengthened the position of the absolute determinist. Patrick writes in beautiful language : "His (man's) humble origin has been discovered. He is only the highly developed form of simplest animal life. There is no break in nature—no place where its laws cease to operate. The leaves of the tree unfold in accordance with these laws. In the same way the child eats, sleeps, grows, thinks and even chooses, all in conformity with natural law.[10]

There is another way of approach to the subject of freedom prevalent in history of philosophy, known as indeterminism. The philosophers who regard determinism as incompatible with freedom and

therefore deny the deterministic thesis are often called the libertarians. Indeterminism is the view that denies determinism and maintains that some events, among them human choices and volitions, happen without any cause or explanation. But indeterminism does not mean accidentalism. It only rejects the nexus which binds all existence in a unified and thorough determination.[11] Descartes stands out in modern philosophy as a defender of free will and his view may be called indeterminism with respect to the voluntary operations of the mind. In his *Meditations*, he describes human freedom as infinite, meaning that no limitation whatsoever is put upon the mind's power of choice. There have been several arguments given in favour of indeterminism. These arguments may be designated as positive and negative arguments. The positive argument in favour of indeterminism stresses on the fact of our direct experience. We all know directly that I could have done otherwise, i.e., other than what I have done. After having followed a particular road to my destination, I know that I could have taken another road or I could not have taken the journey at all. Thus freedom of will is a matter of intuition that is universal and that is why it deserves serious consideration. The negative argument in favour of indeterminism says that if determinism is true, that is, if we have no freedom of will, morality itself will be at stake, and there will be no hope for future as determinism admits no real change in the universe. However, determinism may argue that its laws are the laws of inevitable progress. As to the intuition or the feelings about one's own self, there is always a possibility of mistake.

A new interest has been given to indeterminism regarding human choice by the discovery of the principle of uncertainty or the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy in physics. But, "The principle of indeterminacy

in physics can be thought to provide a solution to the problem of the freedom of the will only at the expense of confused thinking, for there is no way of basing human responsibility on the impossibility of simultaneously determining the position and momentum of elementary particles".[12] And what is more important against complete indeterminism is that if the 'free' will is conceived of as a will that is not determined by anything else, it would imply that men's choices are completely random and capricious, utterly mysterious and inexplicable. John Hospers raises a pertinent point that freedom is possible only to the extent that determinism is true. If some act of mine were causeless, not even caused by my character, habits or motives or by anything that constitutes me as a person, how could I be held responsible for anything? How can some acts be mine if they are not caused in any way by me?[13] If one's action is strictly uncaused, then it is difficult to see in what sense it can be within the control of an agent or in anyway ascribable to him. Again, the difficulty with determinism is that it seems to render every action ultimately unavoidable. The implications of determinism do not significantly differ from those of pure fatalism.

In order to meet the difficulties of both determinism and indeterminism, some philosophers have defended another type of theory called self-determination. Kant, Fichte, Nicolai Hartmann, Thomas Reid, Samuel Clarke, C. A. Campbell, Chisholm are some of the defenders of this theory. They deny both that our choices are always caused by previous events in accordance with natural laws and also that they are in any way matters of mere chance. Instead, they argue for a special kind of 'agency' or 'self-determination'. The essence of this theory is that human beings are sources of causes of their own actions; that their being the sources or causes distinguishes those bodily motions that are actions from those that are not,

the latter being caused by something other than themselves. Free actions are those that an agent performs but which he is not caused by anything else to perform. This theory thus distinguishes 'action' or 'agency' as a basic philosophical category, treating actions as different in kind from other 'events'. Nicolai Hartmann is one of the champions of this theory. Self-determination occupies a major place in his *Ethics*. He writes, "In the analytical argument for the freedom of the will, three complex facts of the moral life come into consideration as points of departure: the consciousness of self-determination, the fact of responsibility and accountability, and the consciousness of guilt."[14] We do not have the knowledge of this self-determination in ordinary sense of the term, rather it is a conviction. Not self-determination itself but only the consciousness of it is a phenomenon. In each case an action is done, man consciously receives the inevitable impression: I do this but I can also do otherwise; it depends upon me. This is the consciousness of self-determination.[15]

If this theory is true, it enables us to meet the difficulties of both determinism and indeterminism. But the question is, is the self-determination theory itself true? John Harpers raises the point in this way : "That our decisions are caused by our decisions is plausible enough. But can it be true that our decisions are self-originating, not caused by anything that went before? ... If it means that our decisions are self-caused, what does this mean? Can anything be the cause of itself? And what is its relation to antecedent conditions?"[16] Thus, this theory raises some serious metaphysical questions regarding the nature of human constitution that are not sufficiently clarified. Surely, the thesis is unintelligible enough and cannot be accepted.

What view on freedom then should we hold? It depends on the concept of the theory of obligation one holds. The concept of freedom of the teleologist differs from the concept of freedom of the deontologist. It can be said that generally deontologists deny that morality is compatible with determinism and a teleologist is a determinist. But there are different ways of approach to the problem. Ross, a deontologist holds moral responsibility to be consistent with determinism. Again, one can say Hume is a teleologist and a determinist both. But there is no harm in calling him a champion of freedom. There is no doubt that one's concept free will has to do with one's theory of moral obligation. A theory of obligation is about what makes an action obligatory. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* speaks of four types of theories of obligation :

1. Utilitarianism : It answers the question by reference to the good produced. Hedonistic utilitarianism is one of the variety but not the only variety of it.

2. Aprioristic view: Reference may be made to universal laws known *apriori* independently of the consequence produced. Immanuel Kant is the greatest champion of this view.

3. Intuitionist view : It says that we see what we ought to do by intuition in each particular case.

4. And there is another view that recognises certain *apriori* laws as holding independently of the good done by observing them yet regards them not as absolute laws but as instances of '*prima facie*' duties. A *prima facie* duty differs from an actual duty by the property of its being exceptionless. W. D. Ross is one of the proponents of this view.[17]

Some authors have legitimately reduced all the above four theories of obligation into two :

1. Teleological theories and
2. Deontological theories.

My use of 'teleology' is almost synonymous to 'utility'. A teleological theory says that the ultimate criterion or standard of what is morally right, wrong or obligatory is the non-moral value that is brought into being. A teleological theory judges an action by the amount of good produced or the comparative balance of good over evil or to say it in another way, an act ought to be done if and only if it produces a greater balance of good over evil. Such a theory allows us to ask, "Why should one be moral?" But a deontologist would not allow us to ask such a questions. It may be maintained that such questions are illegitimate, for to ask them would suggest that there is some ulterior purpose behind the exercise of virtue, or the performance of duty. To take virtue as a means to an ulterior end is in direct antagonism to the voice of moral consciousness. Thus, a deontologist denies that the right, the morally good or the obligatory is a function of what is non-morally good. A deontological theory is a mixed bunch and includes the aprioristic view, intuitionist view and the view that distinguishes between actual and *prima facie* duties.

We have shown our favourable inclination towards utilitarianism in our present thesis, but we do not consider hedonism to be the only form of utilitarianism. The voice of fate which we have noticed in the age of myths and the writings of the tragedians has changed into a voice of freedom in Aristotle. Aristotle has tried to make teleology and freedom consistent. We have not accepted J. S. Mill's version of teleology uncritically. Pleasure solely cannot and is not the end of our actions. . The

very foundation of ethical hedonism, i.e., psychological hedonism is a faulty theory. We do not always seek pleasure, our basic desires are actually our primary appetites. But no doubt, there is some teleology behind our moral actions and Mill is right in holding that. We have considered William McDougall's views and have seen that even our instinctive actions are purposive and not mere blind tendencies. To the question "what do right actions have in common?" the answer is that a right action is what promotes the greatest possible conditions for human survival. Our moral actions are geared to our organic survival, consciously or unconsciously. We have considered two critics of utilitarianism : Kant and Gandhi, but we have not found it necessary to alter our view.

Our view concerning human freedom lies somewhere between the views of the teleologist and the deontologist, the empiricist and the apriorist. In this regard I shall heavily fall back on the views expressed in John Watkins paper, "Three views concerning human freedom" published in *Nature and Conduct*.[18] He criticises both the empiricist view and the aprioristic view which may roughly be taken to mean the teleological view and the deontological view. The 'third view' he offers is what I wish to develop in what follows. This of course does not mean that I am going to accept his views as whole. It is generally held that empiricist or teleological view of morality is necessarily associated with determinism and heteronomy. Watkins himself does not try that much to reconcile utilitarianism with autonomy, but I think that his paper contains potentials for an answer to that problem.

We may name our view on human freedom as "rational determination". There are four essential features of this rational determination theory which are as follows :

1. All rational thinking is problem oriented.
2. Problems exist objectively, 'out there' so to speak.
3. If p be the description of the main components of some problem situation and s be a promising scientific solution for p, then s will logically transcend p, go beyond p, or have excess content over p. That is s cannot be computed from a knowledge f p: it has to be invented.
4. A proposed solution cannot be verified, but it may survive testing and other kinds of criticism.

Of these four essentials mentioned, what seems to me most important for our purpose is that all rational thinking is problem oriented. To this, we add that freedom consists in reasoning out the solutions. Now, it is necessary that we make a distinction between merely reacting to an external situation in a causally determined way and responding to a problem situation in a rational and resourceful or innovative way. This distinction is ignored by strict determinism. If all behaviour is completely determined causally, we cannot single out certain human actions as having an extra something that lifts them out of the class of casually determined reactions. There are of course borderline cases, in which the distinction becomes blurred. But the distinction comes into its own in difficult and demanding situations where one may have the imagination and knowledge to see a possible way out where another man would have been trapped. Our idea of human freedom comes essentially to this—a man preserves his autonomy in a threatening situation so long as he continues to respond to it in a resourceful and inventive way of his own. Moreover, we regard freedom as a matter of degree and as Watkins would suggest, we replace the autonomy/ heteronomy dichotomy with a scale ranging from full autonomy to full

heteronomy. Watkins gives an example of a heroin-addicted person as a case of full heteronomy. Full autonomy is unattainable. A person's position regarding freedom on this scale is a function both of the situation he is in and of the way in which he is responding to it.

We advocate not full autonomy, neither heteronomy nor casual determinacy, but a rational determinacy. "Such rational determinacy within an objectivity open situation does not entail heteronomy".[19] A person, who acts in a rationally determinate way, acts both freely and predictably. Predictability does not presuppose causal determinacy always. It would be justified and useful for our purpose if we make a distinction between two kinds of predictability :

1. R-Predictability – associated with rational determinacy.
2. C-predictability – associate with causal determinacy.

R-prediction may say nothing about the physical detail of the predicted person's behaviour; and C-prediction may say nothing about the predicted person's future course of action. Thus, our previously mentioned proposition may be modified thus—a person acting in a rationally determinate way acts both freely and R-predictably.

This rational determinacy may be legitimately called by some as a sort of self-determination, but it differs from the kind advocated by Spinonza and Kant. R-prediction associated with this sort of determination may misfire because of failure on the part of the observer or some external circumstances. Suppose that an agent A appears to a competent and informed observer B to be in a grim 'single-exist' situation : A can do X which will be nasty; anything else will be disastrous. So B predicts that A will do X. But then A does something else. But when B reflects upon what

A is doing he realises that, although it is something that he (B) would never have thought of doing in that situation, it does have some chance of succeeding. Suppose however, it fails. B now makes another 'single-exit' prediction which again fails. Such cases have not been considered by the apriorist self-determinism. Rational determinacy does not entail necessity and universality of moral acts. But what I would like to add to the above is that although R-prediction may fail at times, the possibility of finding out reasons behind the action performed always remains.

The above theory of rational determinacy fits well with our understanding of utilitarian morality. We have already mentioned earlier that by utilitarianism, we understand and mean a teleological view of morality based on facts of experience. We do not uphold the crude and narrow 'pleasure-seeking' standard of moral action but we are anxious to recognise man's urge for survival. We are to regulate our actions by reference to the existing needs and claims of ourselves and others. So the inclination to do the right thing is never an inclination to seek pleasure as such, but pleasure justly distributed. Reason has a role in seeking the best means to the enjoyment of pleasure whether by the individual or pleasure as interwoven with others. It is reason that takes us out of our individualism and makes us sociable. Reason comprises of experience and memory. Reason deduces for us conditions that would be best for our survival. It is reason that has shown that the individual existence is secured only in an organised society. Persons are both individual and social. Thus, society and the institution of morality come into existence. Society is a child of our reason. That we are social beings implies we are free because we are not social by nature. Human beings struggle for existence with a weapon that is typical to them and unlike those of the other creatures of nature. The true

nature of reason is not fully known and probably will never be even with the use of reason itself; an eye cannot see itself directly. But we are convinced enough to say that reason is our Prometheus that brings freedom for us. Greater the power of reasoning, greater is the freedom.

Notes and References

---

1 Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethics,* Page 19.

2 Ibid, page 20.

3 *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Vol. II), ed. Paul Edwards, New York : Macmillan and Free Press, 1972, Page 96.

4 *Ethics*, page 30.

5 Ibid, page 30.

6 *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Vol. II), page 360.

7 Ibid, page 359.

8 Peters, R. S. (ed.) *Nature and Conduct*, London : The Macmillan Press, 1975, page 201.

9 *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, page 367.

10 Patrik, G. T. W., *Introduction to Philosophy,* page 306.

11 *Ethics*, page 65.

12 *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (ed. John Urmson and Jonathan Ree), London : Unwin Hymann, 1989, page 78.

13 Hospers, John, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1988, page 326.

14 *Ethics*, page 143.

15 Ibid, page 145.

16 *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, page 345.

17 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, page 759.

18 *Nature and Conduct*, page 200 *off*

19 Ibid, Page 218