



Philosophical Review

The Ethical Implications of Determinism

Author(s): E. Ritchie

Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (Sep., 1893), pp. 529-543

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2175426>

Accessed: 14-11-2017 11:38 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Philosophical Review, *Duke University Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Philosophical Review*

THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DETERMINISM.

A SERIOUS defect in much of our modern ethical writing is the failure to recognize the necessity of working on strictly scientific lines when endeavoring to develop a sound theory of moral philosophy. At present we mix up ethics as a science with ethics as an art ; we try to combine in our textbooks on morals the methods of the pulpit with those of the class-room, and we cannot discuss the theory of ethics with absolute freedom, because we are constantly hampered by the fear lest our conclusions should prove hurtful, in their application, to human interests ; hence we work at a disadvantage, and ethics at the present day lags far behind, not only the physical sciences, but the sister science of psychology. In no respect is this weakness more noticeable than in the vague and unsatisfactory treatment of determinism by many even of our most brilliant writers, who, while they would never think of denying the necessity of reasoning from effects to causes in any other sphere of knowledge, yet hesitate to admit that natural antecedent conditions alone are to be sought for in explanation of moral actions.

Yet, if ethics is in the future to be studied by scientific methods, we shall be forced to admit the validity of the law of causation in the domain of moral phenomena as unreservedly as we now accept it in that of physical phenomena. Or, rather, we shall have to break down that wall of separation which still in our thought is allowed to isolate the activities of man from those of the rest of nature ; recognizing frankly that to understand such human activities means that we know from what they spring, and in what they result, and that we can *begin* to study any fact of moral significance only on the supposition that it has had a cause, the discovery of which will form its explanation. It is just this view which, when held without any reservation, constitutes determinism as opposed to what is called libertarianism, which asserts that man's actions

are not in this respect like other events, — that they are not the inevitable outcome of precedent conditions, but are, in some quite unique sense, ‘free.’ The purpose of this article is, however, not to fight over again the old battle of the freedom of the will, but to indicate some of the changes in our ethical notions which must result from the attempt to carry out to their logical conclusions the implications of the determinists’ doctrine.

It may, nevertheless, be desirable for the sake of clearness to state this doctrine very briefly and in its simplest terms. A human character is the result of inheritance and of those external circumstances which in their totality, as they affect any man, we call his environment. Were there given, then, an absolutely complete knowledge of a man’s character at some particular moment when he has to choose between two courses of action, with an equally full and accurate acquaintance with his circumstances, the course which he will adopt could be predicted with perfect certainty. This is equally true whether the choice be important or trivial, whether it involve moral issues or not ; it is true when a man chooses his dinner at a restaurant, when he chooses his profession in life, when he chooses to be a martyr for conscience’s sake, or to be a traitor to a sacred cause intrusted to his keeping. Always the result could be foretold, were the whole nature of the man, and the facts as present to his consciousness, precisely known. His actions must be thus and so, for just *this* man, at *this* time and under *these* conditions. It has been claimed that since there is no external force compelling the individual to a particular deed, the word ‘must’ is out of place in this connection, and on this account Mill and others have objected to the use of the words ‘necessity’ and ‘necessitarian.’ But the objection has really little weight ; the determinist view is necessitarian, for the determination is equally a necessary one, whether it arises from the character of the individual — itself, of course, an effect of previous causes — or from the direct action of external forces. Thus we may as well face our problem squarely, and grant that the determinists’ position is,

that in all choice, the thing chosen is what, given the man and the circumstances in which he is placed, *must* be chosen, that it is no more possible he should act otherwise than that the lily should produce rose-buds.

All this would probably long ago have been assented to as an unavoidable corollary of the universality of the reign of law in nature which science has disclosed, had it not been felt that a belief in man's responsibility is necessary to morality, and that such responsibility presupposes a freedom which is incompatible with determinism. It has constantly been asserted that right and wrong, good and evil, are notions which lose all ethical significance if human actions and thoughts are regarded as simply the natural and necessary effects of antecedent conditions, and that, therefore, the whole fabric of our current system of morals must totter, and may eventually fall in ruins, if we take away the belief in human freedom, with its logical consequent, the responsibility of each individual for his own character and conduct.

There is a certain amount of truth in such statements. A thorough and careful application of scientific principles and methods to the mass of vague, ill-defined, and sometimes mutually incompatible notions which go to make up the popular theory of morals, would certainly introduce into it fresh difficulties, and would bring into prominence many inconsistencies that are now only latent. It does not, however, follow, because our present uncritical ethics would have to be overhauled and perhaps to a large extent reconstructed, that morality itself would be endangered by the process. Our practical ethics at present has advanced beyond our ethical theory, we are building better than we know. The work of a moral philosophy is to establish such general principles as may afford a rational support for our present efforts in practical ethics, and a guide for the formation of moral standards and judgments. And for this purpose we must accept the validity of the scientific category of causation.

In truth, the defense of a moral theory which demands the shutting out of science from the ethical sphere, — which says,

in effect, we will maintain the dogma of human indeterminism, even though reason is forced to admit the cogency of the argument against it, because we need that dogma as a bulwark against indifference and fatalism, — this defense is itself morally indefensible. To dread the legitimate outcome of our own thinking, is to be guilty of treason to that authority on which moral judgments, like all others, depend. An absolute confidence in the rightful supremacy of truth not only is the scientific temper, it is the only justifiable attitude of mind for the practical moralist.

Let us see what will be the result of accepting the conclusions of the determinist, or necessitarian, view of human conduct — as regards the ethical notions, first, of freedom, and secondly, of merit and demerit.

1. Freedom. It is a false antithesis which opposes liberty and determinism, as though a free action must be identical with an uncaused event. It is irrational to speak of any occurrence as though it sprang into existence of itself, unrelated to, and in independence of, all other physical and psychical phenomena. But if to deny that an action has a cause is absurd, it does not follow that reason forbids us to recognize certain classes of action as free. What we want, is a clear understanding of the meaning of the concept freedom, what acts are free, and what it is that differentiates such acts from all others. And no change in the denotation of the word is needed. The acts which the libertarian calls free, the determinist calls free too, — those, namely, to which the agent is not directly constrained by any force external to himself, and which are consciously performed with the idea of attaining an end which is more or less clearly present to the agent's mind. On the negative side, then, my freedom implies that the act, for instance, a movement of my hand, is not the work of some person or thing outside of me, as it would be if the hand were forcibly moved without regard to my wishes, but that it is exclusively *my* act. On the positive side, it implies some degree of consciousness of the act, and of the consequences that are to follow from it. In a word, *all truly voluntary acts are free.*

The expression 'freedom of the will,' as has often been pointed out, is not so much incorrect as tautological. That all volitions are determined by motives, that is, ideal presentations which are pleasurable, and that such motives owe their existence to the character and past experience of the individual, does not militate against their freedom in the least. Let us take an example in the ethical sphere. Suppose a man has alternative courses of action, with the probable results of each, presented to his mind. A merchant, for instance, is conscious that he must either commit an act of dishonesty or suffer a serious loss to his business. What he will do depends on his character, and that is constituted by his inherited disposition as modified and developed by the complex influences of family life, education, and social and business environment. Could we know all these antecedent circumstances in their entirety, we would have all needful materials for judging what the man's conduct would be under the given circumstances. But none the less the individual is a free agent. His freedom means just this, that he is not a mere machine, without consciousness and therefore without volition, but that he has a purpose in view, an idea of which he desires the realization. The product of the man, his conduct, is as certainly predetermined as is the manufactured article that the machine turns out when a particular material has been supplied to it; but the man is a *conscious* mechanism, he knows what will be the result of such and such movements, and why they will subserve an end that he desires better than certain other movements would do; or it may be, that, having two or more desirable ends before his mental vision, he recognizes the superior attractiveness of one of them. Only so far as the act is thus consciously performed, only in so far as it is a product of a reasoning process, can we call it voluntary or free. A man is not a free agent when he does something to all intents unconsciously, as in the case of somnambulism, or in making reflex motions; he is only very imperfectly free when his act is done with a low degree of consciousness, as when he performs some habitual action, as we sometimes say, 'without thinking'; he is only perfectly free when, — having before him an ideal

presentation of all that the act implies, of its results and of the consequences that will ensue if it is not done, — he does or forbears to do it. Since human knowledge is extremely limited, and men's actions are usually the result in part, at least, of impulse and habit as well as of reason, it follows that absolute freedom is an ideal rather than a reality. But if the view just suggested be the correct one, it is evident that the more rational a man's actions are — the more they correspond to an intelligent survey of all the facts — the more 'free' is the agent. Not only, then, does the determinist retain the notion of freedom in his ethical system, but he emphasizes to the full its significance and value.

One effect, then, of the thoroughgoing application of the category of causation to ethical notions, will be to lay stress on clearness of consciousness as an essential differentia of free activity. A knowledge of an end in view is what distinguishes reason from instinct, and a knowledge of what we are doing distinguishes the conscious and deliberate act from the sub-conscious working of habit. If we do not know what we are doing, nor why we are doing it, we are in so far merely an unconscious part of the vast machinery of nature. And such involuntary performances have, taken in themselves, no moral worth. Their interest, from the moralist's point of view, consists in the evidence they give as to what have been the true voluntary acts — those done with an approximately perfect consciousness — in the past, and as to what future voluntary acts will occur in the case of the man whose instinctive or otherwise involuntary actions are of such and such a kind. The thousand and one little mannerisms, the accent, the walk, the tricks of gesture, are the outward crystallizations of the individual's past life-history, — a history many passages of which consist of deliberate resolutions and choosings. On the other hand such unconscious, or only sub-conscious, actions form a not unimportant factor in determining the nature of those future deeds, which, being voluntary, are capable of bearing a directly moral stamp. If the flower of the moral character is found in the intelligent act, deliberately

chosen, its roots lie to a great extent in the unseen region of instinctive and unreasoned impulses.

And this brings us to another aspect of the concept of freedom, which the determinist cannot afford to ignore. Man's liberty implies that, while his acts are, like all other natural events, determined by antecedent conditions, the *immediate* medium of determination is the self. What I shall be or do tomorrow, however imperfectly known to myself or others, is absolutely, certainly, and irrevocably fixed in the nature of things. But to a very large extent indeed, this 'I' of tomorrow is simply the outcome of the 'I' of today, as the latter is similarly the product of the 'I' of yesterday. The Ego is not a mere loose agglomeration of separate psychical particles, it has an organic unity of its own, however difficult it may be to describe this unity in terms of any other. In the adult human being the mental life has, as it were, solidified; the richer, the more complex the experience has been, the further has this process of individualization gone on. At the earliest and most plastic stage of existence the acts are but slightly colored by the peculiarities of the personal character. The stimulus gives rise to the motion spontaneously and almost immediately. But the act which is deliberately carried out after full reflection is the exponent of a formed and relatively stable character. It is when the principal cause of an action is to be found in its relation to the permanent core of thoughts and feelings, which form the substantial center round which the more transient experiences group themselves, that the action is truly the man's action,—that it is free. What we do is never undetermined, but in so far as we are free agents it is determined by ourselves. It is true of a human being, what Spinoza long ago said of God, that his freedom consists in this, that he acts always from the necessity of his own nature. Consequently, the individual whose nature is still so unformed and inchoate that the acts he calls his are only due to the direct influence of outside forces, and are not expressions of his own personal character, has not attained to freedom. Like a wave of the sea, driven by the wind

and tossed, he knows nothing as yet of the perfect law of liberty.

Thus we may sum up our account of freedom by the statement, that the act is a free one in so far as it is consciously and deliberately performed, and that the agent is free in so far as the act we call his is really his own—the expression of an intelligent purpose, which purpose is an outcome of his own essential personality. It is the recognition that his deeds are the expression of his own character which constitutes his sense of responsibility; and it is the consciousness that such deeds will, and must, have certain effects, by him more or less clearly foreseen, upon himself and others, that constitutes them intelligent or voluntary actions. So far, then, from determinism being opposed to a belief in freedom, it is the knowledge of the relation of cause to effect, or the clear recognition of the necessary connection which subsists between phenomena, which is the essential condition of free action. In a well-known passage in Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, that writer quotes Spinoza's saying, that a stone set flying through the air would, if it had consciousness, attribute its flight to its own volition. "To which," says Schopenhauer, "I only add that the stone would be right. The impulse given the stone is for it what the motive is for me, and what in its case appears as cohesion, gravitation, and rigidity, is the same in its inner nature as that which I recognize in myself as will, and which the stone too, had it the same knowledge, would recognize as will." Schopenhauer's purpose, of course, is to establish the identity between what we call force in the external world and what we know as will in the human mind. But the great pessimist's restatement of the Spinozistic doctrine needs a further correction. For that freedom which he relegates to the sphere of an unintelligent and capricious will has its true existence in reason. Freedom is not an escape from the law of causation, but an intelligent submission to that law; it is not a concept that must be banished into the outer darkness of the Kantian noumenal world,—it exists in and through knowledge, and it is in proportion to the increase in the

clearness and extent of the mental vision that action becomes truly voluntary, and that man becomes free.

2. Merit and Demerit. No clearer and more satisfactory account has ever been given of what we may call the popular conception of what these terms imply, than that of Bishop Butler in his '*Dissertation of the Nature of Virtue.*' He says: "Our sense or discernment of actions, as morally good or evil, implies in it a sense or discernment of them as of good or ill desert. It may be difficult to explain this perception so as to answer all the questions which may be asked concerning it; but everyone speaks of such and such actions as deserving punishment; and it is not, I suppose, pretended that they have absolutely no meaning at all to the expression. Now, the meaning plainly is not that we conceive it for the good of society, that the doers of such actions should be made to suffer. For if unhappily it were resolved that a man who, by some innocent action, was infected with the plague, should be left to perish, lest, by other people coming near him, the infection should spread, no one would say he deserved this treatment. Innocence and ill desert are inconsistent ideas. Ill desert always supposes guilt; and if one be not part of the other, yet they are evidently and naturally connected in our mind. The sight of a man in misery raises our compassion towards him; and if this misery be inflicted on him by another, our indignation against the author of it. But when we are informed that the sufferer is a villain, and is punished only for his treachery or cruelty, our compassion exceedingly lessens, and, in many instances, our indignation wholly subsides. Now, what produces this effect, is the conception of that in the sufferer which we call ill desert. Upon considering, then, or viewing together, our notion of vice and that of misery, there results a third, that of ill desert. And thus there is in human creatures an association of the two ideas, natural and moral evil, wickedness and punishment. If this association were merely artificial or accidental, it were nothing, but being most unquestionably natural, it greatly concerns us to attend to it, instead of endeavoring to explain it away."

Butler's account amounts in brief to this, that moral evil and suffering are associated in our minds in such a manner, that when the one is observed we look for and desire the other. When there is conduct that we judge to be wrong, we look for pain to accrue to the agent, which pain, viewed in connection with the wrong act, is punishment. Similarly, we are pleased when the good deed is followed by pleasure to the doer. Again, when we see a case of misery we are sympathetically unhappy, unless it is shown that this suffering is a consequent of moral evil, in which case our sympathy ceases, or at all events is lessened. In all these respects Butler's description is perfectly correct. Granting, however, that this is so, we have here, it must be noticed, simply a psychological fact, a case of association which when it occurs gives pleasure, and the absence of which produces pain. We have no right, *prima facie*, to assume that we *ought* to rejoice when the sinner suffers or the good man is made happy. The moral justification for our satisfaction in the meting out of 'poetic justice' must rest on experience. It must be based on the fact that the association of moral and physical evil, and of moral and physical good respectively, has been found to conduce to the increase of human welfare. It is one thing to say that we *do* like to see a criminal punished, and quite another to say that we *ought* to like to see him punished; the latter can only be proved by showing that the pain inflicted usually results in a larger good. If good and ill desert, then, are legitimate and permanently useful ethical concepts, it will not be enough to point out, with Butler, that they are due to an association of ideas which is natural; it must also be shown that they do not lose their significance when the nature of this association is critically investigated.

Merit and demerit, or good and ill desert, are terms which we apply to certain classes of action to express the sense we have that it is fitting and proper such actions should meet with praise and reward on the one hand, or blame and punishment on the other. The question, then, arises, whether, supposing human character and conduct are determined, and must

be, under the particular antecedent and co-existent circumstances, just what they are and no other, it can be fitting and desirable to bestow such approval or disapproval, reward or punishment. For, if rewards ought to be given, then we may well call those actions to which they are appropriate meritorious; and similarly, if penalties are rightly inflicted, the conduct which leads to them is of 'ill desert.'

The determinists' justification for praising good actions rests on two grounds, on the fact that such praise is the suitable expression of the pleasure which these actions give him, and on the expectation that it will tend to produce other good actions. In the first place, then, our commendation of good conduct is the natural outflow of the satisfaction we take in the sight of moral beauty. How this 'moral sense' has arisen is a question we are not here concerned with. The average man is conscious of pleasure when witnessing, or hearing of, deeds of heroism or self-denial, just as he is to some extent susceptible to beauties of color, form, and harmony. And as our admiration of the scent of the rose and the hues of the sunset is not lessened by our being aware that such odor and colors are the effects of certain natural causes, so neither need the more profound admiration that we feel in the presence of moral perfection be diminished, because we know that the conduct we rejoice in is the inevitable expression of a human character, which is itself the summing up of numerous preceding facts. The aesthetic pleasure which the sight of a lovely flower gives us is not affected by our knowing that a particular seed, sown on just this soil, and growing up under just such conditions of air, sunshine, and moisture, must produce this very blossom and no other; and our recognition that an act of courage or unselfishness is a product of preceding mental conditions need not interfere with the satisfaction which it gives our moral sense.

The close analogy which subsists between the aesthetic and the ethical feelings has been often overlooked in modern moral philosophy, where the dread of disturbing the foundations of practical ethics has prevented a thorough analysis being made of the origin and nature of the moral consciousness. The pre-

dominance, also, of theological over philosophical modes of thought in the system of Christian ethics which forms the basis of our every-day moral standards, has tended to make us assume that moral notions are altogether peculiar and unique in their constitution, and that it is only by the use of metaphor that we can compare moral and sense pleasures. Modern science, however, in proportion as it teaches us to explain every event by referring it back to the preceding phenomena on which it depends, is, indirectly but surely, forcing us to recognize what a large measure of truth lay in the old Greek conception of the relation between the good and the beautiful.

That the praise we bestow upon the man whose actions are noble and good is justified by its effects upon the recipient and others, needs no proof. There are, perhaps, men whose moral stature is so lofty that the applause of their fellows is not needed, as their blame is not regarded, by them; but for the vast majority the moral judgment of their equals is a wholesome influence, constantly checking the lower impulses, and restraining from at least open indulgence in wrong doing, while stimulating and encouraging the striving after that which is lovely and of good report. It is, therefore, perfectly reasonable for the determinist to praise the conduct that he believes to be beneficial to society, since his praise is to some extent helpful in the production of such conduct. Not only is praise, then, the expression of the recognition of what is morally beautiful and admirable, but it is a power which, well directed, makes for righteousness. And what is true of praise is still more evidently true of more substantial forms of reward. The determinists' position, that the man under given conditions must necessarily be just what he is, does not render it illogical to praise his character and reward his conduct.

Now let us look at the case of demerit. Here the same line of argument holds good. The vicious man and the vicious act are repugnant to our moral feelings. Just in so far as we are moralized, in so far as we have advanced to a relatively high stage of ethical development, are cowardice, deception, cruelty, and lust abhorrent to our souls. They are to the moral sense

what the hideous and discordant are to the aesthetic feelings. It is perfectly reasonable for us to feel pain and displeasure when a crime is committed. And this distaste need not vanish because we realize that the crime is simply the objective manifestation of the criminal's character, which itself is the outcome of inheritance and environment. Nor does this knowledge forbid us to punish the evil doer; on the contrary, the more we emphasize the fact that the crime is the effect of the action of a man's environment upon his innate character, the more evident is it that what should be done is to introduce him into such new conditions as shall be suited to modify his character in such a way as may be desirable. Hence, punishment as reformatory is in perfect harmony with the determinists' contention. The notion that one of the most important functions of punishment is the moral restoration of the criminal, which is being gradually accepted by students of social science, must make headway just in proportion as the connection between crime and social conditions is clearly recognized. Of this regenerative work of punishment the Elmira Reformatory in the State of New York is a grand object-lesson. In a recent article in the *Fortnightly Review*, its superintendent, General Brockway, to whom the singular success of the institution is mainly owing, has the following suggestive words: "During the sixteen years of the existence of this Reformatory the writer has personally examined every prisoner admitted, amounting to considerably more than five thousand, with increasing charitableness for their crimes. The impression deepens that a man's character is not altogether a matter of his own free choice, it is formed by myriad influences, pre-natal and otherwise, largely beyond his own control; and besides, the responsibility of society for crimes is by no means inconsiderable. *Crimes indicate character, and character is but the preponderance of habitude, a resultant of the impressional life and of heredity.*"

But while this recognition of crime as the outgrowth of given conditions leads to that large charity of which General Brockway is, in deeds as well as words, the eloquent expositor, yet it is entirely consistent with the retention of punishment,

not only as a means for reforming the criminal, but also as a restraining force, preventing the commission of crimes and protecting the interests of society. Even capital punishment is on this ground justifiable, if the fear of it deters from murder. Only, could we steadily hold in view the determinist doctrine, that what the man *does*, is what he *is*, and that, under given conditions, he must be just what he is, then the feeling of revenge which still lingers, disguised under the name of justice, in our conception of punishment, would give place to a profound pity, that might well lead to a firm determination to do all in our power to alter those social conditions which have consequences so terrible and tragic. *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*, though human mercy, if it would be rational and wise, must often follow the Divine decree that as a man sows so shall he reap.

The objection of the moralist to determinism is that it makes us deny the fact of man's responsibility as a moral agent. But even the most consistent of determinists, who clearly realizes that the so-called 'freedom' which is opposed to causation is a figment of the imagination and is inconsistent with rational thought, must know from his daily experience that man is responsible,—that he has to answer to himself and to others for that conduct which is the outward expression of his nature. Responsibility is there, we cannot deny or ignore it, but we must not give it an interpretation that is inconsistent with clear and logical thinking.

Our first feeling, indeed, when the conviction of the inevitableness, alike of man's nature and of his fate, comes home to us with the force of a necessary truth, is a sort of indignation against the moral order of the world. What right is there in the universe or its maker to inflict pain as a penalty for the sin which is itself an infliction? Has not, in truth, the clay a rightful complaint to bring against the potter, that it has been made thus? Such questions lead us beyond the limits of the present discussion. Two considerations, however, may in conclusion be pointed out. In the first place, the libertarian theory does not help us to a solution of this mystery of evil.

Granted, that the man is 'free,' that his sin is his own fault, yet why does he have faults? Let it be assumed that at each time of making a choice, what was chosen depended on the man himself, and even that, with just his character, it might have been other than it was, yet if he has chosen wrong, and his Creator foreknew this would be so, why was the opportunity for the fall given him? Still, with Omar Khayyám, we may protest :

“ O Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
 And ev'n with Paradise devise the Snake :
 For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
 Is blacken'd — Man's forgiveness give — and take ! ”

Secondly, a universe in which all events should *not* be causally related to antecedent facts is to us absolutely unthinkable. A world of unrelated phenomena is a self-contradictory conception, which melts away as the mind tries to realize it. The world of experience is a coördinated system, a cosmos, all the parts of which stand in necessary connection with all the rest. In the ethical sphere, as in all other departments of knowledge, we find this inter-relation of parts, each dependent on others, each known only by the discovery of its numerous relations to others; to ignore or deny the fact of these relations is to obstruct the path of moral progress and to reduce ethics to the position of a pseudo-science.

E. RITCHIE.