

Reactions to Determinism¹

by

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It is curious how difficult it is for many people to discuss determinism dispassionately. Determinism is a presupposition of all inductive inference; and when that has been said and shown, one might well imagine that nothing more need be said about it. However, the determinism-freewill debate goes on, and the deterministic viewpoint continues to awaken a hostility which is expressed with varying degrees of vehemence - or to arouse an enthusiasm equally out of proportion to the emotional importance of the subject. I intend here to consider this hostility and enthusiasm in relatively extreme forms, as these will serve better to bring out the fallacies which they involve and their hidden psychological roots.

Students of a more or less religious bent, brought up against arguments for determinism for the first time, may find themselves convinced, but at the same time feel very depressed about it, saying such things as, "Now I can do nothing to improve my character - causation is everything, and I can only sink in it, and swim with the stream, and let my bad 'nature' rule me". This seems to echo the feeling of those in an earlier day who accepted the Calvinistic system but believed that they themselves were predestined to be damned. The poet Cowper² is the best-known example of a man in this state of mind, but there is ample evidence that during his period it was not at all an uncommon one.³ In the modern variant there is no actual conviction of "damnation" - all that has been swept away by "science" - but the feeling of being a prey to a "bad" nature, the feeling of moral helplessness, remains. And among those who are *not* convinced by the arguments for determinism, the fear of this moral helplessness is quite openly avowed as the main motive of their opposition. Only by finding arguments against determinism can they keep themselves happy and active and "healthy-minded", and avoid the state of depression which I have attempted to describe. Those who accept determinism in this spirit consider themselves to have been reluctantly compelled to adopt the viewpoint of "science"; but they do at least believe they have adopted that viewpoint - they *have*⁴ at least the comfort of being on the right side intellectually. But are they?

Are these emotional reactions to determinism compatible with a scientific approach to the subject? One cannot, of course, argue from a belief to an emotion or from an emotion to a belief - we are entitled to feel as we like towards any proposition that our mind entertains; pure logic, at all events, cannot say us nay. Empirically, however, there is something suspicious in the fact that

¹ Edited by Peter Øhrstrøm, Per Hasle, and David Jakobsen. The paper is kept in the Prior archive at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, box 7. The article is difficult to date. A cautious guess would be the first half of the 1940s.

² William Cowper (1731 – 1800), English Poet who struggled throughout his life with insanity. Author of songs like "Light shining out of Darkness" and "There is a fountain fill'd with blood."

³ In "Children of The Damned" Prior presents several other cases of believers who are firmly convinced that they are among those predestined to eternal damnation.

⁴ Underlined words in Prior's MS are all made into italic in the text.

working scientists seldom feel so unhappy about the presuppositions of their work as the reluctantly converted determinists I have described. This difference in emotional reactions is good prima facie evidence of a difference in actual belief. The parallel with Calvinism points in the same direction. And in fact this “difference in actual belief” is not at all difficult to define.

The “dismal determinist” is “unscientific” because he still places himself outside the chain of causation, despite his admission that he is not outside it in the sense in which the doctrine of freewill demands that he should be. He places himself outside the chain of causation as its helpless victim - as a piece of “pure effect”. It is only through this fallacious mode of thinking that he is able to regard his “character” as something completely outside of himself and fatally dominating him. In fact, of course, not only *is* his “character” within himself but he is his character, or at least part of it. The chain of causation not only runs “within” himself as well as outside, but part of it is himself, his active self; he is himself a “cause” as well as an effect. The working scientist, who turns the laws of nature to his own uses (or, more often, to those of other people), generally knows this without even having to think about it.

Opponents of determinism, however, are seldom satisfied with this answer to the charge that determinism makes one morally helpless. What is the root of this continued opposition - or, alternatively, of continued unhappiness about the superior cogency of the arguments on the deterministic side? We may find this question easier to answer if we turn from the “dismal” or reluctant determinists to the immoderately happy ones. The poet Shelley, at the time when he wrote “Queen Mab”,⁵ plainly felt determinism was nothing less than a Gospel, a revelation to be proclaimed with joy to a blind world. This also is hardly the attitude of the sober scientist, and comes closer to the happiness of the Calvinist who is convinced, not that he is one of the reprobate, but that he is one of the elect (like Johannes Agricola in Browning's poem).⁶ An intermediary stage between the “elect” Calvinist and Shelley would be a theologian who accepted the doctrine of predestination but held that all men were predestined to be saved (a view propounded last century by Principal W. Hastie of Glasgow). The main point about Shelley, however, is that his happy paeans to “divine Necessity” indicate that he, as much as any determinist of the sadder hue, regards himself as outside the chain of causation, as “pure effect” - not, indeed, as causation's helpless victim, but as its darling child.

The metaphor is Shelley's own. His address to the Causal Chain begins, “Necessity” Thou mother of the world!”⁷ The same metaphor was used by some of the Calvinists – not the earliest ones, but such men as William Wisheart, Principal of Edinburgh University in the early 18th century, in whom the creed had had time to mature. “The Child of the Creature”, said Wisheart, “is first conceived in the Womb of God's Eternal Decree, and then is in Time brought forth into the Light of Actual Being. God's Decree is, as it were, with Child of Beings.” And this is the metaphor that is always used for “the earth” or “the Universe” or “Nature” considered as a being apart from the beholder; it is the inevitable metaphor - inevitable because, like all “inevitable” metaphors, it is not a metaphor at all; because it is “the Universe”, “Nature”, “Necessity” which is the symbol, and

⁵ Queen Mab (1813) Percy Bysshe Shelley.

⁶ Johannes Agricola in Meditation (1842) Robert Browning.

⁷ Prior is probably referring to one of Shelley's rather lengthy notes Titled “Necessity! Thou Mother of The World.”

the devotee's mother who is symbolised. It is she who is feared or loved by the dismal or happy determinist; it is with her that he fears or desires to be united; it is to her womb that he fears or wishes to return. This emotional determinism which pretends to be "science" is thus in reality a subtle form of the religious illusion, perhaps classifiable as a species of Buddhism.

We can now see why it is not enough to point out to the man who fears determinism that the "Universe" which he regards as outside himself, oppressing him, doesn't exist. It does exist - it is his mother. We may also see why it is cold comfort to point out that he is part of the causal chain. Instead of making his personal identity real and secure for him, this statement only tells him that his personal identity is lost in this being alien to himself - that, just as he fears, he is not a man at all but is back in the womb again. We say to him, "You are not the victim of the Universe, but a part of it"; but that is exactly the victimisation that he fears. Argument with the "happy" determinist is futile for "equal and opposite" reasons. Neither man is living in the real world as one being among others, one "cause" among other causes; what each lives in is a dream world in which all other beings are swallowed up in the phantasm of his mother, and he may at any moment be swallowed up too, gladly or in terror.

The opposite, or apparent opposite, of determinism is also defended and attacked with greater vehemence than the subject seems to demand. On the face of it, there would seem to be nothing more completely opposed to determinism than the view expressed by Father Zossima in Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov",⁸ that we are not only responsible for ourselves but for everyone else as well, that "each is responsible for all". But just as emotional determinism secretly denies the all-embracing character of the causal chain, so this doctrine secretly denies the universality of freedom. It is only in a universe completely determined except for one's own choices, that our smallest movement affects the motion of the most distant stars; and it is only in such a universe that our most trivial action affects the moral destiny even of those whose relation to us is most slender and indirect. If freewill is admitted in others beside ourselves, then we cannot be completely responsible for them, for no matter how whole-heartedly we strive for their good, they may choose to exercise their freedom harmfully. Zossima's doctrine attempts to attribute this "total responsibility"⁹ to all men; but such a thing is logically impossible - if a single person is responsible for all the rest, then not one of the others can be responsible for anything. This doctrine is "moral solipsism"; the will of the man who holds it is alone free, and the cause of all that is - "pure cause", and the one cause in the universe.

The only kind of universe in which general freedom is conceivable is one which we might call "loosely packed". In a box of powder which is ground infinitely small and packed infinitely tightly, the slightest disturbance in one area will affect the most distant grains. If, however, the grains are relatively large and packed relatively loosely, one can imagine, for example, a circular motion of the grains in one area which does not affect even quite closely adjacent grains at all; and a more powerful pushing of the grains in one area would push other grains further away, but after a certain distance had been reached there might be no effect. Common notions of freewill and partial

⁸ The Brothers Karamazov (1881) Dostoyevsky, Foydor. Dostoyevsky was a significant source of inspiration for Prior during his studies in New Zealand.

⁹ Prior returns to a criticism of this notion in *Consequences of Action* (1956). See Jakobsens Phd thesis on A.N. Priors Contribution to Metaphysics from Aalborg University 2012.

responsibility seem to involve a picture of the world rather like this. If, of course, the packing were quite loose, there could be no responsibility, and “freedom” would be empty - each particle or person would simply move about without affecting the others at all. The common notion assumes a “moderately” loose packing in which there is elbow-room for a measure of free action, but in which we are sufficiently bound together by “necessity” for us to have a measure of influence on one another and responsibility for one another.¹⁰ Such is the world-picture drawn, for instance, by William James.

There is a sense in which determinism too is compatible with a relatively loose packing of the things in the world. Causes and effects may not form a single chain; events may run in a number of chains which are partly independent of one another. This, in fact, seems to be the actual state of affairs. “The Universe”, we may surmise, is always a myth, a religious rather than a scientific conception. Morally, at all events, while we are causes as well as effects and in that sense are “responsible” for some things, we are not causes of everything - many events we cannot help, and some we cannot even allow for, and can only regard as “fatalities” in relation to ourselves; or as “free” in relation to ourselves, if we choose to speak that way. The idea that one is not only a cause, but the only cause in the whole universal chain, is certainly an illusion, comparable with the illusion that one is “pure effect”.

It may be surmised that, as the other illusion reflects one's relation to a parent, this one reflects one's relation to a child or children. The "Universe" that is regarded as "pure effect" in relation to oneself is a symbol for one's offspring, real or desired. The evidence for this, apart from the probability that “converse” symbols represent converse realities, is not so clear as in the other case; though there is significance enough in the fact that Father Zossima's religion, and Dostoievsky's own, looks strongly towards the future, towards a coming “transfiguration” of the earth, the Mother, “watered with the tears” of so many of the novelists' heroes and heroines, and towards a new Coming of the Son of Man.

If “pure childhood”, complete irresponsibility, exists only in the womb, pure parenthood, total responsibility, exists only in the tomb. Only after one is dead is one nothing but the past “cause” of what now is, living only in one's “effects” and no longer being in part an “effect” oneself. The myths of total responsibility and total irresponsibility are alike forms of the desire to escape from life, from the reality that is bounded by birth at one end and death at the other; or, if they are held “dismally”, of irrational and futile rebellion against these limits of our being.

¹⁰ This argument is almost verbatim used by Prior in *Consequences of Action* (1956).