Of Liberty and Necessity

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(from *A System of Logic*, Book 6, Chapter 2)

§1 The question whether the law of causality applies in the same strict sense to human actions as to other phenomena, is the celebrated controversy concerning the freedom of the will, which, from at least as far back as the time of Pelagius, has divided both the philosophical and the religious world. The affirmative opinion is commonly called the doctrine of Necessity, as asserting human volitions and actions to be necessary and inevitable. The negative maintains that the will is not determined, like other phenomena, by antecedents, but determines itself; that our volitions are not, properly speaking, the effects of causes, or at least have no causes which they uniformly and implicitly obey.

I have already made it sufficiently apparent that the former of these opinions is that which I consider the true one; but the misleading terms in which it is often expressed, and the indistinct manner in which it is usually apprehended, have both obstructed its reception and perverted its influence when received. The metaphysical theory of free-will, as held by philosophers, (for the practical feeling of it, common in a greater or less degree to all mankind, is in no way inconsistent with the contrary theory), was invented because the supposed alternative of admitting human actions to be necessary was deemed inconsistent with every one’s instinctive consciousness, as well as humiliating to the pride, and even degrading to the moral nature, of man. Nor do I deny that the doctrine, as sometimes held, is open to these imputations; for the misapprehension in which I shall be able to show that they originate unfortunately is not confined to the opponents of the doctrine, but is participated in by many, perhaps we might say by most, of its supporters.

§2. Correctly conceived, the doctrine called Philosophical Necessity is simply this: that, given the motives which are present to an individual’s mind, and given likewise the character and disposition of the individual, the manner in which he will act might be unerringly inferred; that if we knew the person thoroughly, and knew all the inducements which are acting upon him, we could foretell his conduct with as much certainty as we can predict any physical event. This proposition I take to be a mere interpretation of universal experience, a statement in words of what every one is internally convinced of. No one who believed that he knew thoroughly the circumstances of any case, and the characters of the different persons concerned, would hesitate to foretell how all of them would act. Whatever degree of doubt he may in fact feel arises from the uncertainty whether he really knows the circumstances, or the character of some one or other of the persons, with
the degree of accuracy required; but by no means from thinking that if he did know these things, there could be any uncertainty what the conduct would be. Nor does this full assurance conflict in the smallest degree with what is called our feeling of freedom. We do not feel ourselves the less free because those to whom we are intimately known are well assured how we shall will to act in a particular case. We often, on the contrary, regard the doubt what our conduct will be as a mark of ignorance of our character, and sometimes even resent it as in imputation. The religious metaphysicians who have asserted the freedom of the will have always maintained it to be consistent with divine foreknowledge of our actions; and if with divine, then with any other foreknowledge. We may be free, and yet another may have reason to be perfectly certain what use we shall make of our freedom. It is not, therefore, the doctrine that our volitions and actions are invariable consequents of our antecedent states of mind, that is either contradicted by our consciousness or felt to be degrading.

But the doctrine of causation, when considered as obtaining between our volitions and their antecedents, is almost universally conceived as involving more than this. Many do not believe, and very few practically feel, that there is nothing in causation but invariable, certain, and unconditional sequence. There are few to whom mere constancy of succession appears a sufficiently stringent bond of union for so peculiar a relation as that of cause and effect. Even if the reason repudiates, the imagination retains, the feeling of some more in connection, of some peculiar tie or mysterious constraint exercised by the antecedent over the consequent. Now this it is which, considered as applying to the human will, conflicts with our consciousness and revolts our feelings. We are certain that, in the case of our volitions, there is not this mysterious constraint. We know that we are not compelled, as by a magical spell, to obey any particular motive. We feel that if we wished to prove that we have the power of resisting the motive, we could do so, (that wish being, it needs scarcely be observed, a new antecedent); and it would be humiliating to our pride, and (what is of more importance) paralysing to our desire of excellence, if we thought otherwise. But neither is any such mysterious compulsion now supposed, by the best philosophical authorities, to be exercised by any other cause over its effect. Those who think that causes draw their effects after them by a mystical tie are right in believing that the relation between volitions and their antecedents is of another nature. But they should go farther, and admit that this is also true of all other effects and their antecedents, if such a tie is considered to be involved in the word necessity, the doctrine is not true of human actions; but neither is it then true of inanimate objects. It would be more correct to say that matter is not bound by necessity, than that mind is so.

That the free-will metaphysicians, being mostly of the school which rejects Hume’s and Brown’s analysis of Cause and Effect, should miss their way for want of the light which that analysis affords, cannot surprise us. The wonder is, that the
Necessitarians, who usually admit that philosophical theory, should in practice equally lose sight of it. The very same misconception of the doctrine called Philosophical Necessity which prevents the opposite party from recognising its truth, I believe to exist more or less obscurely in the minds of most Necessitarians, however they may in words disavow it. I am much mistaken if they habitually feel that the necessity which they recognise in actions is but uniformity of order, and capability of being predicted. They have a feeling as if there were at bottom a stronger tie between the volitions and their causes: as if, when they asserted that the will is governed by the balance of motives, they meant something more cogent than if they had only said, that whoever knew the motives, and our habitual susceptibilities to them, could predict how we should will to act. They commit, in opposition to their own scientific system, the very same mistake which their adversaries commit in obedience to theirs; and in consequence do really in some instances suffer those depressing consequences which their opponents erroneously impute to the doctrine itself.

§3. I am inclined to think that this error is almost wholly an effect of the associations with a word, and that it would be prevented by forbearing to employ, for the expression of the simple fact of causation, so extremely inappropriate a term as Necessity. That word, in its other acceptations, involves much more than mere uniformity of sequence: it implies irresistibleness. Applied to the will, it only means that the given cause will be followed by the effect, subject to all possibilities of counteraction by other causes; but in common use it stands for the operation of those causes exclusively, which are supposed too powerful to be counteracted at all. When we say that all human actions take place of necessity, we only mean that they will certainly happen if nothing prevents:---when we say that dying of want, to those who cannot get food, is a necessity, we mean that it will certainly happen, whatever may be done to prevent it. The application of the same term to the agencies on which human actions depend as is used to express those agencies of nature which are really uncontrollable, cannot fail, when habitual, to create a feeling of uncontrollableness in the former also. This, however, is a mere illusion. There are physical sequences which we call necessary, as death for want of food or air; there are others which, though as much cases of causation as the former, are not said to be necessary, as death from poison, which an antidote, or the use of the stomach-pump, will sometimes avert. It is apt to be forgotten by people’s feelings, even if remembered by their understandings, that human actions are in this last predicament: they are never (except in some cases of mania) ruled by any one motive with such absolute sway that there is no room for the influence of any other. The causes, therefore, on which action depends are never uncontrollable, and any given effect is only necessary provided that the causes tending to produce it are not controlled. That whatever happens could not have happened otherwise unless something had taken place which was capable of preventing it, no one
surely needs hesitate to admit. But to call this by the name necessity is to use the
term in a sense so different from its primitive and familiar meaning, from that
which it bears in the common occasions of life, as to amount almost to a play upon
words. The associations derived from the ordinary sense of the term will adhere to
it in spite of all we can do; and though the doctrine of Necessity, as stated by most
who bold it, is very remote from fatalism, it is probable that most Necessitarians
are Fatalists, more or less, in their feelings.

A Fatalist believes, or half believes, (for nobody is a consistent Fatalist), not
only that whatever is about to happen will be the infallible result of the causes
which produce it, (which is the true Necessitarian doctrine), but, moreover, that
there is no use in struggling against it; that it will happen however we may strive to
prevent it. Now, a Necessitarian, believing that our actions follow from our
characters, and that our characters follow from our organisation, our education, and
our circumstances, is apt to be, with more or less of consciousness on his part, a
Fatalist as to his own actions, and to believe that his nature is such, or that his
education and circumstances have so moulded his character, that nothing can now
prevent him from feeling and acting in a particular way, or at least that no effort of
his own can hinder it. In the words of the sect which in our own day has most
perseveringly inculcated and most perversely misunderstood this great doctrine, his
character is formed for him, and not by him; therefore his wishing that it had been
formed differently is of no use; he has no power to alter it. But this is a grand error.
He has, to a certain extent, a power to alter his character. Its being, in the ultimate
resort, formed for him, is not inconsistent with its being, in part, formed by him as
one of the intermediate agents. His character is formed by his circumstances,
(including among these his particular organisation), but his own desire to mould it
in a particular way is one of those circumstances, and by no means one of the least
influential. We cannot, indeed, directly will to be different from what we are; but
neither did those who are supposed to have formed our characters directly will that
we should be what we are. Their will had no direct power except over their own
actions. They made us what they did make us by willing, not the end, but the
requisite means; and we, when our habits are not too inveterate, can, by similarly
willing the requisite means, make ourselves different. If they could place us under
the influence of certain circumstances, we in like manner can place ourselves under
the influence of other circumstances. We are exactly as capable of making our own
character, if we will, as others are of making it for us.

Yes, (answers the Owenite), but these words, “if we will”, surrender the whole
point, since the will to alter our own character is given us, not by any efforts of
ours, but by circumstances which we cannot help; it comes to us either from
external causes or not at all. Most true: if the Owenite stops here, he is in a position
from which nothing can expel him. Our character is formed by us as well as for us;
but the wish which induces us to attempt to form it is formed for us; and how? Not,
in general, by our organisation, nor wholly by our education, but by our
experience---experience of the painful consequences of the character we previously
had, or by some strong feeling of admiration or aspiration accidentally aroused.
But to think that we have no power of altering our character, and to think that we
shall not use our power unless we desire to use it, are very different things, and
have a very different effect on the mind. A person who does not wish to alter his
caracter cannot be the person who is supposed to feel discouraged or paralysed by
thinking himself unable to do it. The depressing effect of the Fatalist doctrine can
only be felt where there is a wish to do what that doctrine represents as impossible.
It is of no consequence what we think forms our character, when we have no desire
of our own about forming it, but it is of great consequence that we should not be
prevented from forming such a desire by thinking the attainment impracticable,
and that if we have the desire we should know that the work is not so irrevocably
done as to be incapable of being altered.

And, indeed, if we examine closely, we shall find that this feeling, of our being
able to modify our own character if we wish, is itself the feeling of moral freedom
which we are conscious of. A person feels morally free who feels that his habits or
his temptations are not his masters, but he theirs: who even in yielding to them
knows that he could resist; that were he desirous of altogether throwing them off,
there would not be required for that purpose a stronger desire than he knows
himself to be capable of feeling. It is of course necessary, to render our
consciousness of freedom complete, that we should have succeeded in making our
character all we have hitherto attempted to make it; for if we have wished and not
attained, we have, to that extent, not power over our own character---we are not
free. Or at least, we must feel that our wish, if not strong enough to alter our
character, is strong enough to conquer our character when the two are brought into
conflict in any particular case of conduct. And hence it is said with truth, that none
but a person of confirmed virtue is completely free.

The application of so improper a term as Necessity to the doctrine of cause and
effect in the matter of human character seems to me one of the most signal
instances in philosophy of the abuse of terms, and its practical consequences one of
the most striking examples of the power of language over our associations. The
subject will never be generally understood until that objectionable term is dropped.
The free-will doctrine, by keeping in view precisely that portion of the truth which
the word Necessity puts out of sight, namely, the power of the mind to co-operate
in the formation of its own character, has given to its adherents a practical feeling
much nearer to the truth than has generally (I believe) existed in the minds of
Necessitarians. The latter may have had a stronger sense of the importance of what
human beings can do to shape the characters of one another; but the free-will
doctrine has, I believe, fostered in its supporters a much stronger spirit of self-
culture.
§4. There is still one fact which requires to be noticed (in addition to the existence of a power of self-formation) before the doctrine of the causation of human actions can be freed from the confusion and misapprehensions which surround it in many minds. When the will is said to be determined by motives, a motive does not mean always, or solely, the anticipation of a pleasure or of a pain. I shall not here inquire whether it be true that, in the commencement, all our voluntary actions are mere means consciously employed to obtain some pleasure or avoid some pain. It is at least certain that we gradually, through the influence of association, come to desire the means without thinking of the end: the action itself becomes an object of desire, and is performed without reference to any motive beyond itself. Thus far, it may still be objected, that the action having through association become pleasurable, we are, as much as before, moved to act by the anticipation of a pleasure, namely, the pleasure of the action itself. But granting this, the matter does not end here. As we proceed in the formation of habits, and become accustomed to will a particular act or a particular course of conduct because it is pleasurable, we at last continue to will it without any reference to its being pleasurable. Although, from some change in us or in our circumstances, we have ceased to find any pleasure in the action, or perhaps to anticipate any pleasure as the consequence of it, we still continue to desire the action, and consequently to do it. In this manner it is that habits of hurtful excess continue to be practised although they have ceased to be pleasurable; and in this manner also it is that the habit of willing to persevere in the course which he has chosen does not desert the moral hero, even when the reward, however real, which he doubtless receives from the consciousness of well-doing, is anything but an equivalent for the sufferings he undergoes or the wishes which he may have to renounce.

A habit of willing is commonly called a purpose; and among the causes of our volitions, and of the actions which flow from them, must be reckoned not only likings and aversions, but also purposes. It is only when our purposes have become independent of the feelings of pain or pleasure from which they originally took their rise that we are said to have a confirmed character. ``A character'', says Novalis,``is a completely fashioned will’’; and the will, once so fashioned, may be steady and constant, when the passive susceptibilities of pleasure and pain are greatly weakened or materially changed.

With the corrections and explanations now given, the doctrine of the causation of our volitions by motives, and of motives by the desirable objects offered to us, combined with our particular susceptibilities of desire, may be considered, I hope, as sufficiently established for the purposes of this treatise.