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Liberty and Fatalism, Determinism and Will

Errico Malatesta

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We say that a revolution is necessary, that we want one, and that we are devoting our energies to awakening and uniting the wills intent upon this end.

But a fundamental objection is opposed to us. "Revolution," we are told, "is not made by the caprice of man; it comes (if it does come) only when the time is ripe for it. History does not move by chance but develops in accordance with natural laws which are immutable, irresistible, and against which the will of man can do nothing."

In practice, at least in the majority of cases, this objection involves nothing but a polemic, or a political expedient. Just because a thing is not desired it is affirmed that it is impossible; the power of will is denied when one is called upon to make an effort in a direction which is not convenient; and, (since now nearly all who know the alphabet set themselves up as scientists and philosophers) desire itself is rationalized and science and philosophy are called upon to act as go-betweens for the little schemes of individuals and parties. On the other hand when a thing is interesting

and pleasing, all theories are forgotten, one makes the necessary effort and, if concurrence of others is needed, one appeals to their willingness and exalts the power of will instead of denying it.

In spite of this, however, it is certain that every man who thinks, feels the need to put his conduct into harmony with his intellectual convictions, and, when he acts, he likes to take account of the efficacy and the quality of his actions. Every man who thinks and observes and who is learning the innumerable facts of nature and of history, feels the need of organizing his acquired impressions into a system, and of finding some general principle which will unify and explain them.

From this need of comprehension and of mental adjustment, have originated both the theological and the naturalistic systems of philosophy. From this need are born the inquiries and the discussions concerning the problem of Will, that is, of the power of man (or of any conscious being) to sway the course of events. This is the fundamental problem of any philosophy—it has fatigued, and continues to fatigue, the thinkers of all schools.

This fact would not have been otherwise than advantageous to the intellectual development of man and for the better utilization of human forces, had it not been that, very often, by a common mental illusion, that which is a simple product of the imagination was mistaken for the real objective and more or less comfortable hypotheses were mistaken for certified facts with which it was attempted to unify and explain known facts. Worse still, when simple words without any precise and definite significance were taken for real things.

Thus were invented God and the Immortal Soul; thus were invented Matter, Force, Energy (all with capital letters) and all the other mental concepts designed to explain by words, the universe which is not understood.

But above all these entities, which it is well to treat with prudent and smiling skepticism, there is a superior principle which seems truly unassailable—or at least such that the human mind cannot

But we want to live a conscious and creative life, and such a life demands, in the absence of positive concepts, certain necessary presuppositions which may be unconscious but which are always nevertheless, in the soul of everyone. The most important of these presuppositions is the efficacy of the will. All that can usefully be sought are the conditions which limit or augment the power of the will.

conceive its negation; thus is the principle of Causality which, all by itself constitutes the philosophy called Determinism. Nothing creates itself and nothing destroys itself; no effect without sufficient cause; no cause without its proportionate effect.

Very well. If, to the human mind, this seems to be a necessary and absolute truth then logical reasoning is also a necessity of the mind, and it is also true that every premise leads to its obvious conclusion. Now the logical conclusion of the principle of causality, understood as the universal and unavoidable principle, is that, starting out of eternity, everything is a necessary concatenation of events which could not be other than as determined, and that therefore, man is nothing but a conscious automaton, will is an illusion, and liberty is non-existent and impossible.

It is a fact that, reasoning in the abstract, many willingly arrive as far as the ultimate consequences and they say, with Laplace, that, if a man could know all the existing forces in the universe at a given moment, with all their points of application, their intensities and directions, he could calculate all that has happened, and everything that will happen, at any moment whatever in eternity and at any point whatever in infinite space—everything from a star in its orbit to the verse of a poet, from an earthquake shock to a newspaper article.

This is, in its most consequent expression, the philosophical system which is commonly called Determinism, and which, starting from the concepts of Nature and Necessity, and following rational and scientific method, arrives at the same conclusions as those reached by the ancients with their Fate and the theologians with their Predestination.

There are also some who seek to restrict and attenuate the meaning of the system and to elude its consequences, trying to conciliate the idea of necessity with that of liberty. But these are, as we see it, vain and illogical attempts for, a “necessity” which is not always necessary, which admits restrictions and exceptions, can no longer be called by that name.

Determinism responds admirably to certain needs of the intellect and it is a sure guide in the study of the physico-chemical world. But it indubitably paralyzes and denies the will and makes useless and laughable any effort directed toward any end.

Nevertheless, while every man more or less thinks and acts by deterministic logic, there aren't any who actually translate their philosophy into life—at any rate, we do not know of any. This is not strange because, if there were any such they must find it useless to make known and to propagate their ideas, convinced, as they must be, that that which must occur (even the cerebral antics of each one) will occur fatalistically at the determined time, and that nothing can possibly prevent it, nor retard it, nor hasten it.

Obviously the determinists—who are, in general, studious, active and desirous of progress, and who have become determinists not only thru reasoning but also thru reaction against the prejudices, the impositions, and the obscurantism of religions—are floundering about in a continuous contradiction. They deny free will and, therefore, responsibility, and then they become indignant against the judge who punishes the irresponsible. As if the judge were not himself determined and therefore also irresponsible! They say that all things that take place (natural phenomena, human history, actions, passions, and individual thoughts) do so in an uninterrupted and necessary sequence of cause and effect, reducible to physico-chemical facts which are subject to mechanical laws. Then they assign great importance to education and to propaganda! They are the apostles of charity, tolerance, and liberty. As if evil, intolerance, and tyranny were not, since they exist, necessary things which the laws of mechanics should explain! Often they are revolutionists, struggling and sacrificing themselves for something which, according to their system, will happen and must necessarily happen of its own accord, when the time comes.

It is true that it could be answered that the determinist who thus contradicts himself is also determined and cannot help contradicting himself, just as we cannot do otherwise than point out

the contradiction.—But, then, one may as well say that doing is equal to not doing and that all this reasoning and striving is but a comic opera, tiresome or diverting, but—also necessary. How are we to escape from these difficulties?

The absolute Free Will of the spiritualists is contradicted by facts and is repugnant to the intellect. The negation of Will and Liberty by the mechanists is repugnant to our feelings. Intellect and sentiment are constituent parts of our egos and we know not how to subjugate one to the other.

We may not know how to deny the principle of causality but neither can we look upon ourselves as automata. Nor if we seek and desire the explanation of all things, do we deny their existence simply because we do not succeed in explaining them. For there are many more things in the universe than in all the systems of philosophy! Science and philosophy are but attempts, still infinitely imperfect, to explain the universe. And while science searches and philosophy syllogizes, we ought to live—to live like men who will obtain from life the maximum possible satisfaction.

What is Will in its essence? We do not know. But do we know what, in their essence, are Matter and Energy? Efficacious will must be the power to introduce into the chain of events, new factors which are not necessary and not pre-existent—it must be, in fact, the power to produce and effect without a cause. This immediately repels the intellect educated to the scientific method. But isn't it true that upon retracing the path of the chain of events and regardless of the philosophical system one takes as a guide, one always arrives at an unknown and perhaps inconceivable First Cause—that is to say, at an effect without a cause? “We do not know.” To us, this seems to be the last word that can be said, at least for the present, by wise philosophy.