

THE NECESSITY OF CHOICE

HERBERT MCARTHUR

University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont

This Journal, recognizing no disciplinary boundaries as long as a paper has a bearing on psychology, presents herewith a contribution by a professor of English. The paper was suggested to him by his observation of the apathy among students which is today so frequently noted. He traces this apathy to the complete determinism which is implied or made explicit in the teaching of the various sciences, including—and we would say mistakenly so—in the teaching of psychology. He shows that both free will and determinism are only man-made fictions or working hypotheses, and that while the deterministic fiction, interpreted unimaginatively, is stultifying to the life of the individual, the fiction of choice is indispensable when the theory of determinism is applied to human beings.

“Free will versus determinism” as a subject for argument still has audience-gathering power. Countless knights have drubbed and thwacked each other in this tournament; still however the old positions are taken up and the ruined armor is put on once more. In the classical dilemma, arguments designed to prove that man has freedom of choice are impaled on the language of causality. But causality meanwhile is transfixed by common experience, sometimes disguised in idealism, but usually reducible to the brute fact that man does experience the act of choice. Even the determinist searches for words to express his meaning, though the words he chooses are necessarily a product of his training and beliefs. It is more important to study the role and limits of choice-making than to bypass it as an illusion or to mythologize it as an uncaused cause.

It may be said that the controversy has no practical bearings, since everyone will do just what he does and not otherwise, regardless of whether he thinks he chooses to do it or is impelled to do it, and regardless of whether he thinks both motives are true, as this article maintains. Nevertheless, the controversy has a practical bearing in that ingrained attitudes like other habits of mind are present events and function causally. A person is less likely to be influenced by an imagined alternative and, more important, less likely to imagine one, if he believes consciously or unconsciously that the imaginative life is illusory.

College students, contrary to the usual professorial opinion, learn only too well the things they are actually taught. Again and again the experience of discussing with students of literature the nature of

freedom, for example as explored by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, leads one to the conclusion that their often-lamented "apathy" is largely due to their having learned all too thoroughly and unquestioningly a narrowing and semantically naive version of the scientific attitude. "Choice," "freedom," and "imagination" are coming to be thought of as toys that the educated man can no longer take seriously. This is a tragic distortion of experience.

THE SEMANTIC PROBLEM

In the language of causality, every event stands necessarily in the relation of effect to some cause, and potentially in the relation of cause to some effect. (The principle of the indeterminacy of subatomic events is no exception, because it is itself an achievement of causal reasoning.) The pattern of causality is envisioned as a chain or interlocking network, and it is irrational (that is, words spoken with a different grammar) to suggest an effect without a cause or a cause that is not also an effect. Nor do we have to wait for further advances in brain physiology to assume that "mental" events are just as much a part of the pattern as are "physical" events. Indeed it is hard to imagine how these two "classes of events" can have anything to do with each other if they are to be taken as entirely different in nature. They can be nothing more than names for the two halves of a whole which our basic dualism of experience dichotomizes for us, with deceptive ease, into a mental life and a bodily life.

Nevertheless, the determinist as well as the believer in free will has been taken in by the misleading distinction between "mental" and "physical" events. The determinist sees no room in the world of events for the existence of alternatives. An event cannot both be and not be. The fact that the tree is growing here is an absolutely compelling reason why it cannot be growing there. The fact that something has happened is an absolutely compelling reason why something else could not have happened instead. Alternatives simply cannot exist. And without alternatives to choose among, choice is a pathetic illusion. The determinist therefore denies that the "mental" event known as choice has any causal efficacy.

RESOLUTION OF THE SEMANTIC PROBLEM

But common experience makes no claim that choice is exercised in the realm of "physical" events. The alternatives that make choice possible exist in the imagination; in other words, they are fictions.

But they exist none the less, they are events, and they must not be thought to have an inferior order of existence in the language of causality. When this is remembered, the denial of alternatives must be withdrawn. In the brain of man the tree grows here; but he can also imagine it growing there, or not growing at all, or being chopped down for firewood, or falling on him. If he thinks it is falling, he will run, even though it "actually" is not and hence could not be falling. His fear of being crushed causes him to run; but this does not preclude his experiencing the choice to do so. In terms of human history he is safe and sound; in his mental life he runs from a scene where he is already lying crushed and bloody under the fallen tree. To call the experience of choice an illusion is to imply a qualitative distinction between "physical" and "mental" events that cannot be allowed in the language of causality. Choice remains a reality even in an absolutely compelling situation; a man who is falling does not necessarily choose to do so. So long as he is aware of an alternative to falling, he may validly, even though ineffectually, withhold his assent. He will not fall resignedly; he will shriek and flail his arms. A falling stone could never think: I'm falling because I must . . . or: I might not be falling if No stone would come up with a Cartesian *Cado ergo sum*.

Thus choice is not a mere illusion, but a fiction that works. Causality is no more than that. The causal relationship is itself not a "physical" event but a "mental" event; this does not render it nonexistent, but it does leave it subject to the same charge, of being illusory, that the determinist throws at the experience of choice. Causality too is a fiction that works. Furthermore, the imaginative power of the mind, that projects alternative chains of causality into a "future" that is really the present, is the same power that enables the mind to construct its causal chains into a "past" that is also a present brain content.

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Alternatives, then, live a causally efficacious life in the order of events that take place in the brain of man. The convenient categorization of these events into imagination, memory, perception, and so forth, must not be allowed to obscure their right to be treated as physical events inextricably woven into the texture of causality and functioning in the present tense. Man chooses; by his nature he has to choose, whenever alternatives are present in his mental life. The choice is not a gratuitous addition to the chain of causality, but an

essential link in that chain. This point is missed by the ordinary proponents of "freedom of the will" as well as by the tough-minded determinists. Choice as an uncaused event in the mind would be of little comfort to any human being. Man could have no control over it, by definition; he could not call it a mystic experience, because a mystic event, though it lacks antecedents, is referred to a divine cause. In practice he would be likely to call it a pathological disturbance, implying an unknown cause in the order of "physical" events. He would be very unlikely to feel responsible for any action stemming from the eruption into his mental life of an event without antecedents.

THE COMPLEXITY AND UNIQUENESS OF CHOICE

Imagined alternatives may be seen as the preliminary signals of possible kinds of behavior, tossed into the mind as into a kind of test-box, in which they are measured against one's estimate of reality; the resulting signals of failure or success are channeled into overt behavior. This process resembles the "feedback" of communication theory; but in applying this analogy it must be remembered that a human being takes into consideration not only what has happened but what he thinks may happen and what he desires to happen, consciously or unconsciously. The furnace must not only have a thermostat, it must also be able to read the paper, listen to the radio, look out at the sky, and then decide how to interpret these forecast signals. It must also sometimes just feel like being unusually cold or unusually warm, for obscure reasons of emotional balance. Such a furnace could be built; but its designer would have to incorporate his choices in it or equip it with choice at random. Random choice is a poor equivalent of the complexity of conscious causal patterns in the mind of man, and no equivalent at all of his rich unconscious life.

In his drive to build machines that think, man runs the danger of thinking like machines. The chief deterrent to the "transistorizing" of the human will must be a recognition of the absolute uniqueness of the individual. The nature of this uniqueness may be understood if we imagine a hypothetical observer who has familiarized himself both psychologically and physico-chemically with a certain Mr. Poorfellow. This hypothetically perfect observer would be able to predict with absolute certainty every action Mr. Poorfellow might make. But Mr. Poorfellow must of course not know the prediction; he must not even know he is being observed. More important, Mr. Superobserver must be careful to keep himself out of his predictions; he must be care-

ful not to let his own motives and training influence his forecast of Mr. Poorfellow's behavior. Not only would he have to be aware of Poorfellow's conscious and unconscious mental life (and aware of the conscious consciously and of the unconscious unconsciously), he would have to negate his own conscious and unconscious life. So long as a glimmer of himself remained he could not be sure that the chains of causality would not intertwine. Superobserver would cease to exist; he would become a superimposed replica of Poorfellow. Poorfellow is himself. If you want to understand Poorfellow, you have to be Poorfellow.

IMAGINATION THE SOURCE OF FREEDOM

The habit of thinking causally and the habit of imagining alternatives should strengthen each other by mutual respect and advice, since they are only as fictions distinguishable from each other. We need to know why things are as they are, but we also need to believe that they could be otherwise. Knowledge may be a form of hypnosis, leading us to channel all our energy into one form of behavior, because it is seen as more "scientific" or "inevitable" than the others; or knowledge may be the ally of freedom, if it is imaginative—if it is willing, that is, to keep in mind the tentative nature of its conclusions and continue to welcome the heretical, the improbable, and the visionary.

Knowledge can be taught; imagination must be experienced. The justification for the teaching of literature, indeed the justification for the very existence of all the arts, is the enrichment of human experience. We taste the possibilities of other experience, of other attitudes and other emotions. In short, we strengthen our conviction that life is full of genuine alternatives.