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THE
INFLUENCE OF HEREDITY
ON FREE WILL.

BY
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[*Translated, by permission, by Annie Besant.*]



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THE INFLUENCE OF HEREDITY ON FREE WILL.

“How naïve is the empty conceit of the freedom of the human will when Nature completely rules it by those instincts of self-preservation which she has implanted in man!”—*G. H. Schneider.*

Two diametrically opposed views, or philosophical opinions, have always been maintained on the important and much debated question of the freedom of the human will. The one declares that its absolute freedom, the freedom of the *Ego*, is proved by the facts of consciousness, or by the knowledge that in a given case we can do one thing as well as another, and that it is therefore raised above all doubt and above all discussion. The other maintains the exact contrary, and says that the human will is absolutely determined, and since it is dependent upon influences from without and from within it is in reality unreasonable to speak of a free choice or decision between two possible courses. The notion that a man can of his own free choice do this or that, arises, say the upholders of this view, from a delusive appearance or from self-deception. The will follows the relatively strongest motive or the relatively pleasantest idea, since it is impossible that the contrary should prevail. Also the interdependence of phenomena, the so-called laws of causality—urge the defenders of this opinion—prove the

impossibility of free will, for each action, according to these laws, is necessary and is unavoidable by the actor.

It is not, indeed, a satisfactory proof of the depth or the certainty of human knowledge that in a question so theoretically and practically important, opinions so essentially different and opposed, so mutually exclusive, should have faced each other unreconciled during long centuries, and should remain in like fashion facing each other to-day. There is, however, one circumstance to be taken into account as a partial explanation of this long controversy, which is a fault of man's heart rather than his head; so-called ethical motives have been mixed up with the handling of this question, and the freedom of the will has been defended as a postulate of morality without which the groundwork of our whole moral system would be in the gravest peril. In a scientific consideration of the matter such a side question is manifestly irrelevant, and if science were able to demonstrate the absolute determination of the human will, then must its determination be admitted, even though the whole of human society were thereupon to fall to pieces. Fortunately, this danger is purely imaginary. It is, on the contrary, to be hoped that morality itself will rise in the same measure as we learn the inner and outer influences which determine the actions of men, and thereby become able to work definitely upon these influences. Further, this proof of the absolute determination of the will is hardly to be made, without logical artifices or unfair arguments. The statistical facts which are often brought forward to support that determination, prove nothing as to the individual will, but only show that the actions of men, or their volitions, are determined on a large scale, and on the whole, by certain influences, which under otherwise

similar circumstances cannot fail to show, or at least permit to be seen, a certain regularity. For instance, the condition of a nation has the greatest influence over the actions of an individual, and these actions change when the condition changes. Thus, according to experience, famine, want of work, commercial crises, wars, etc., raise to the highest point the number of crimes against life and property or the number of suicides, while, on the other hand, they lessen the number of marriages. It is also proved that the number of the last, for example, rises and falls with the relative price of corn. But although all these and many similar influences are among the causes which help to determine the will of the individual, they are yet not the only ones. A far more powerful and more important factor in this determination is the personality of the actor himself; statistics can only disclose to us the outer, and not the inner, motives of a single action, while this personal factor naturally withdraws itself from all statistical calculations. Yet this will of the individual decides whether or not he will yield to those influences of the environment which can be reached by observation.

Further, motives from without and from within are to be distinguished also in the individual will itself; among the first the special and personal conditions amid which an action takes place must be understood, while the *inner* motives arise from the inner nature, or disposition of the individual person, from his personality itself, his character. The character must be regarded as the real immediate cause of all voluntary actions, while the determining outside motives appear more as indirect causes. The worth of a man is always to be measured as greater or less accordingly as his character is proved or maintained amid the influences

brought to bear upon it by circumstances. Here then is the important point upon which modern investigation of nature brings to bear its mighty lever, so as to let in a hitherto unknown light on the freedom of the human will, and to conclude by actual proofs the hitherto unfruitful speculations of theoretical philosophy. No one should now be ignorant of the dazzling light thrown by the great natural investigator, Darwin, on the evolution of the individual characters of men and beasts, of his enthralling researches on the influence of physical and psychical inheritance, and on the gradual evolution of the whole organism. So long as people did homage to the now fortunately exploded theory of separate creative acts, and regarded each species of animals as the special production of a creative will they naturally had no need to examine into the evolution of the individual character; it was plainly, just like the bodily organism, the production of the creative will, and no further explanation was needful. But when the unscientific nature of such a doctrine was recognised people began to understand that each individual was or might be the last product or evolution of a long series of preceding species and of past centuries; then they demanded also some further explanation of the individual character, the mental personality, and this naturally was only to be had where the physical evolution had been found, that is to say in the incidents of descent and development. In fact, there cannot now-a-days be the smallest doubt, scientifically, that the individual character, the whole mental personality of an individual, must be regarded as the last result or production of an interwoven series of developments, a long succession of earlier species, and as moulded also by the conditions environing the act of generation. In other words: character, or that which determines.

by preference the actions of men (and of beasts) is, as to by far its greatest part, inherited from parents and ancestors, and arises by natural necessity out of the constitution of the procreator and his partly inherited, partly acquired characteristics, as well as out of the conditions of the procreation itself. "Man," says Vibot, in his excellent book on inheritance (p. 374, etc.), "who has inherited the thought tendencies of his ancestors, is driven to will, and therefore to act, like them. This heritage of impulses and propensities forms a circle of inner influences in the midst of which he lives, and the power to judge these and, if need be, to overcome resides ever in himself. . . . But in this unceasing conflict between individual and generic qualities between the person and his inheritance, or speaking generally, between freedom and destiny, *freedom is conquered more often than is thought.*" Or, as the famous physiologist, Burdach, put it, more than fifty years ago: "Descent has more influence on our physical and psychical character than all outward material and spiritual circumstances." (Physiology as an Experimental Science, vol. i., p. 571.) We must not, indeed, omit to say that the truth here enunciated is a very old one, and that unprejudiced philosophers and practical physiologists well knew the powerful influence exercised over human will and action by inherited character; perhaps no one knew this better than the great dramatist Shakspeare, whose dramatic characters are all men of flesh and blood, and not the poor puppets which other dramatists dance between heaven and earth, marionette-fashion, on their self-constructed psychological wires. Those who have read my "Force and Matter" will know that in the chapter on freewill, I myself, five years before Darwin, laid great stress on this fact, and brought into

prominence the vast influence of the inherited propensities of character on human will and action, prompting to this or that course. But the great rôle played by the origin of the individual character, the physical inheritance going hand in hand with the mental or spiritual inheritance, could not then be so emphasised as it deserved to be, and as is now possible, thanks to Darwin and the light thrown upon it by his famous theory.

It must not, however, be forgotten that the individual character is not formed only and exclusively by hereditary transmission, but that the environment, experience, training, education, example, etc., also powerfully co-operate in moulding and changing it. But I think I shall not be wrong in maintaining that the inborn and inherited tendencies of the character, or the inherited propensities, instincts, and appetites, are so strong both in men and beasts that, in comparison with them, all other influences and motives fall more or less into the background, and that it is consequently only possible for an individual man to struggle against this perpetual compulsion under very exceptional circumstances. He who brings into the world with him an innate tendency to goodwill, sympathy, conscientiousness, love of right-doing, etc., will, with few exceptions, and under all circumstances, be a genuine moralist, even though he have learned few moral laws; while, on the contrary, an innate propensity to melancholy, or to deceit, or to frivolity, or to folly, or to pride, or to avarice, or to sensuality, or to drunkenness, or to gambling, or to violence, and so on, is, as a rule, not to be controlled or held back by any kind of will or argument. Daily experience most plainly teaches that each person, as a rule, acts in the manner most in accordance with his nature and inner propensities, and that

these innate tendencies and inclinations of our nature generally exercise an influence on our decisions and on our actions, in comparison with which other motives, especially those due to reflection, fall more or less into the background. The youth or the sensualist sacrifices everything to his bodily desires; the old man or the miser and the covetous man sacrifices everything to the desire of gain, to the struggle for possessions; the lazy to the longing for rest or the shunning of work; the ambitious to the striving for honor and distinction; the mother to the love of her children, and so on. The miser, who already has heaped up millions, and who, perhaps, has no children to whom he can bequeath his treasures, aye, and who perhaps has reached the evening of life and knows that he must soon divide his goods among strangers, yet does not cease to gather together wealth. The voluptuous King Henry VIII. of England broke through every bond of decency and morality, and separated himself and his country from the then all-powerful Papacy, simply that he might satisfy his longing for sexual pleasure. The tendency to shame or modesty, which amongst civilised nations has been gradually developed and has been more and more strengthened by inheritance, can transform our maidens and women into veritable heroines in defence of their purity, while among many savage tribes who go perfectly naked, no trace of shame nor of sexual modesty is to be found. Or again, even the civilised nations of antiquity thought and felt quite differently from ourselves on this matter. Innate passion conquers all representations, listens to no reason, and forgets all prudence and all danger. No man can by his simple will thoroughly master innate timidity, and he who has once given way to the demon of drunkenness or gambling, will in

very few cases be able to set himself free again by his own determination. The passionate man perpetrates in anger deeds of which in more quiet moods he would think himself quite incapable; the compassionate or the generous sacrifices himself for others, while the hardhearted does not permit such feelings to have the smallest influence over his conduct. Beasts, when they are under the control of certain propensities, such as sexual desire, hunger, maternal love, etc., are wont to forget utterly all danger and all prudence, and blindly to sacrifice themselves, even although of the most shy or the most timid species. Notwithstanding, we see that also among beasts prudence and consideration may occasionally overcome a propensity or a desire. For example, if young animals have been attracted by a bait and have fallen a sacrifice, the older ones, wise by experience, know how to resist the temptation, and either leave the bait untouched or manage to snatch it in some cunning fashion without being caught at the same time. Among men, whose reasoning and reflective powers are so far raised above those of beasts, this is naturally the case to a far greater extent, so that man is able to speak of a choice or the expression of a free will, in which reason and thought win the victory over desires aroused by sensation or perception; this is a temporary victory of a more rational idea over a less rational. But, as a rule, the individual upon every occasion follows that idea which is the pleasantest to him. Even suicides or religious martyrs are determined on their course by the idea that the condition which awaits them is a more agreeable one than the present.

So, as G. H. Schneider ("On the Animal Will," p. 145, etc.) very well says, all voluntary decisions, both of men and of beasts, are determined partly by objective conscious-

ness, and partly without it; that is, they depend partly on inherited organisation and partly on an act of the understanding. In each single circumstance both factors are concerned. The will, as such, depends, according to him, on the so-called intellectual tendencies, which have been gradually developed from sensations and perceptions. The further we descend in the animal kingdom—according to Schneider—the more weight have these tendencies of feeling and thought, that is the innate and inherited instincts or natural propensities; while, on the contrary, imagination and reason, or acts of the will arising from consciousness, increase in the same measure as the animal gradations approach their highest point, or man. Therefore also, no decided line can be drawn between instinct and will, and the old theological doctrine that animals only act from instinct, from an implanted impulse to purposeful action, without consciousness of the purpose, but man, on the contrary, only from free will, has quite faded. Man is led both by will and by instinct, but there is in him more will and less instinct than in beasts. From this point of view the childish, the childlike, or thoughtless human being, in whom sensational and perceptive impulses more easily master prudence and reason, comes nearer to the animals than the older man, grown wise by experience and by the cultivation of his mental powers. The will is, therefore, never absolutely free, since the inherited organisation traces for it very decided limits, and since outside this organisation a great number of other circumstances—the full investigation of which does not come within the scope of this paper—influence it, narrowing and hemming it in. But in each case the chief limits set to free will appear to lie in the laws of inheritance, and an accurate knowledge of these is therefore

imperative in order to judge rightly in this weighty matter. Unfortunately our knowledge of these laws is still very imperfect; yet we at least know this much with certainty, that psychical heredity displays the same—if not a greater—power and influence, as does physical, and that the abilities acquired during life possess the same transmissibility as those inherited. Hence follows this result—immeasurably important for progress and for the future of the human race—that this transmission, although made without intention and unconsciously, tends towards a continual improvement of the human race, and—result even yet more solemn—that we ourselves have a share in making this improvement. Then in the same measure as each single generation works for its own training, moulding and improvement, inner and outer, in that same measure also it works for the good and for the improvement of all following generations; so that each thus improved race hands on to the following race not only the mental and material treasures which it has gained and heaped together, but also a higher and increased ability for improvement and further progress. Heredity—however slowly and with often great breaks due to popular commotions—raises us step by step to an ever higher grade of moral, mental, and material development, and we shall make the attainment of this object the easier just in so far as we work for our own moral, intellectual, and material perfection, and as in this fashion we enrich the heritage which we bequeath to the next generation. In any case such a prospect and such a call to labor for our further improvement is worth more than all the quackery and nonsense of antiquated dogmas and superstitious fancies, with which the ruling religious systems have sought and still seek to satisfy the mental and emotional

needs of man. For of what use can be all those imaginations of man as to eternity if they miss scientific truth, and if they hinder instead of furthering the progress of knowledge, or lead it into false paths? I consider it wholly impossible that man, already so far advanced, can allow himself to be guided any longer by these leading strings, and the time cannot be very far off when he shall tread the paths of reason and science instead of those of lies and hypocrisy!

Ere I conclude, I would ask you not to regard this paper as one which even half solves the important and scarcely wholly soluble problem of the freedom of the human will. For that task there is not now the necessary time, nor are my weak powers sufficient. I have only aimed to show you—or rather to call to your attention—how great an influence the inherited mental organisation or character exercises over our decisions, and therefore over our actions, over our will—over that will which appears to be bound in so many other ways as well as in the most essential. But since this organisation is not rigid, unchangeable, fixed for all time, but can be changed and improved partly by our own exertions, I have ventured to impress on you the important duty which is binding upon us of striving after that perfection in which all good men agree.

Lastly, for the sake of greater clearness both for myself and for my hearers, I will endeavor to define the results of my enquiry and my opinions in a few brief sentences of summary and review.

1. The will is neither absolutely free nor absolutely determined.

2. It is determined or bound by a large number of inner and outer influences, among which the inherited organisa-

tion, the inborn nature of the mind and character, plays the chief part.

3. It is *relatively* free in so far as purposeful reason or reflection masters in any particular case thoughtless or innate or instinctive propensities and desires.

4. Innate propensities or instincts yield gradually more and more to reason and thought as we rise in the animal kingdom, as well as in the development of the individual man; whence the will becomes freer step by step, and becomes more defined by the subordination of the former.

5. That since the will is not rigid nor unchangeable, it is therefore in the power of man himself by progressive training, moulding, and improvement to free himself from these animal instincts more and more, and thereby to make himself better, happier, and more contented than he has hitherto been.

6. Freethought is above all called to work for the accomplishment of this great end.
