

**FREEDOM AS
ETHICAL
POSTULATE**

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Freedom as Ethical Postulate by James Seth

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BY

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M D C C C X C I

FREEDOM AS ETHICAL POSTULATE.

THE problem of the "Freedom of the Will" is described by Professor Paulsen, in his treatise on Ethics, published two years ago, as "a problem which arose under certain conditions, and has disappeared with the disappearance of these conditions, a problem which exists only for a theological or scholastic philosophy."¹ Professor Paulsen is not alone in thus relegating the question to the region of metaphysical antiquities. Leading ethical writers among ourselves agree with him in considering this "most contentious question" as one with which Ethics, at any rate, need not concern itself. Among others, Professor Sidgwick (especially in the earlier editions of his 'Methods of Ethics'), as well as Mr Leslie Stephen and other Evolutionists, share this view of the

¹ Ethik, I. 41.

question. I venture to differ from these authors, and will endeavour in this essay to show the living and paramount ethical interest of the problem of freedom. It is, I think, one of the central questions of philosophy, which can never become obsolete. Its form may change, but the question itself remains, like all the deepest questions, to be dealt with by each succeeding age in its own way.

For us, as for Kant, the question of freedom takes the form of a deep-seated antithesis between the interests of the scientific or intellectual consciousness on the one hand, and the moral and religious convictions of mankind on the other.

✓ From the scientific or theoretical point of view, man must regard himself as part of a totality of things, animals, and persons. In the eyes of science, "human nature" is a part of the universal "nature of things"; man's life is a part of the wider life of the universe itself. The universal Order can admit of no real exceptions; what *seems* exceptional must cease to be so in the light of advancing knowledge. This, its fundamental postulate, science is constantly verifying. Accordingly, when science—psychological and physiological, as well as physical—attacks the problem of human life, it immediately proceeds to break down man's

imagined independence of nature, and seeks to demonstrate his entire dependence. The scientific doctrine now prefers, indeed, to call itself by the "fairer name" of Determinism; but if it has the courage of its convictions, it will acknowledge the older and truer name of Necessity. For though the forces which bind man are primarily the inner forces of motive and disposition and established character, yet between these inner forces and the outer forces of nature there can be no real break. The force, outer and inner, is ultimately one; "human nature" is part of the "nature of things." The original source of man's activity lies therefore without rather than within himself; for the outer force is the larger and the stronger, and includes the inner. I get my "nature" by heredity from "Nature" herself, and, once got, it is further formed by force of circumstances and education. All that *I* do is to react—as any plant or even stone does also in its measure—on the influences which act upon me. Such action and reaction, together, yield the whole series of occurrences which constitute my life. I, therefore, am not free (as Determinists are apt to insist that I am, though my will is determined); "motives" are, after all, external forces operating upon my "nature," which responds to them, and

over neither "motive" nor "nature" have *I* any control. I am constrained by the necessity of nature—its law is mine; and thus Determinism really means Constraint. The necessity that entwines my life is conceived, it is true, rather as an inner than as an outer necessity; but the outer and the inner necessity are seen, in their ultimate analysis, to be one and the same. The necessity that governs our life is "a magic web woven through and through us, like that magnetic system of which modern science speaks, penetrating us with a network subtler than our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world."¹

The distinction between the new Determinism and the old Necessitarianism has been finally invalidated, so far as science is concerned, by the scientific conception of Evolution. Science now insists upon regarding man, like all else, as an evolved product; and evolution must ultimately be regarded as, in its very nature, one and continuous. The scientific or modern fashion of speaking of a man's life as the result of certain "forces," into which it is the business of the biographer and historian to resolve him, is no mere fashion of speech. In literal truth, the individual is, to the

¹ Mr Pater, in 'The Renaissance.'

view of science, the child of his age and circumstances, and impotent as a child in their hands. The scientific explanation of human life and character is the exhibition of them as taking their place among the other products of cosmical evolution. In our day, accordingly, it is no longer "scientific" to recognise such a break as Mill, following Edwards's hint, insisted upon, between outward "constraint" and inward "determination." All the interests of the scientific ambition are bound up with the denial of Freedom in any and every sense of the word; its admission means embarrassment to the scientific consciousness, and the surrender of the claim of science to finality in its view of human life.

With the assertion of freedom, on the other hand, are as undeniably bound up all the interests of the moral and religious consciousness; Kant's saying still holds, that freedom is the postulate of morality. The moral consciousness dissolves at the touch of such scientific "explanation" as I have just referred to. The determinist may try to prop it up, and to construct a pseudo-morality on the basis of necessity; but the attempt is doomed to failure. The living throbbing experience of the moral man,—remorse and retribution, approbation and reward, all the grief and humilia-

tion of his life, all its joy and exaltation, imply a deep and ineradicable conviction that his destiny, if partly shaped for him by a Power beyond himself, is yet, in its grand outline, in his own hands, to make it or to mar it, as he will. As man cannot, without ceasing to be man, escape the imperative of duty, so he cannot surrender his freedom and become a child of nature. All the passion of his moral experience gathers itself up in the conviction of his infinite and eternal superiority to Nature: she "cannot do otherwise," he *can*. Engulfed in the necessity of nature, he could still conceive himself as "living" the life of nature, or a merely animal life, but no longer as living the proper and characteristic life of man. That is a life rooted in the conviction of its freedom; for it is not a life, like nature's, "according to law," but a life "according to the representation of law," or in free obedience to a consciously conceived ideal.

It is the task of philosophy to resolve this antithesis, to heal the apparent breach between the scientific and the moral consciousness, to mediate between their seemingly rival claims and interests. Various philosophical solutions are possible. It may be that the scientific (which is here the