

PSYCHOLOGY, MORAL PHILOSOPHY, AND DETERMINISM

by John O'Connor

Many philosophers have argued that human freedom is necessary for morality. They have then been led to frame their accounts of human actions, decisions, behavior, and so forth, in order to allow for some degree of freedom, which they feel is necessary for men to be moral. In this paper I will argue, however, that freedom is not a necessary condition for morality; that even if determinism—in a sense incompatible with human freedom—is true and men believe that it is true, it is still perfectly possible for men to be moral.

I undertake this investigation in part for its own sake, but in part to illustrate one way in which scientific theories can be put to use in answering questions in moral philosophy, particularly in metaethics. Many philosophers would grant that anthropologists and sociologists can supply them with interesting examples of moral behavior and moral standards, and that psychologists can give intriguing accounts of moral motivation and of moral development. How this material is to be used by the philosopher, however, is less easy to be clear about.

I suggest that one of its primary roles is to assist the philosopher in his conceptual investigations by helping him to form concepts which are useful, and indeed necessary, if his investigations are to be fruitful. That is, scientific results are of interest to the philosopher not only as a stimulus to his imagination but also as playing an important role in concept formation. The consideration in this paper of the relation between freedom and morality will be used to illustrate this.

Let us assume that the question "Does morality presuppose freedom, or at least a belief in freedom?" is primarily a conceptual question. (I do not mean to suggest that there is a sharp line between conceptual and so-called empirical questions.) That is, a conceptual question is to be answered by laying out what it is to be free and what it is to be moral, and seeing if the latter requires the former. On this view of the question, the chief problem is sketching out the two concepts.

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Since my concern in this paper is primarily with the concept of morality, little discussion will be undertaken of the notoriously tricky notion of freedom. I use the term "freedom" as the opposite of "determinism," where for a person to be determined to do something in this sense is for him to be unable to do anything else. When I say that all men are determined, I mean, therefore, that no one could do other than he in fact does on any occasion.

We all have some intuitive notion of what it is to be moral: it involves at least acting in certain ways, being disposed to have certain "moral" feelings (guilt, shame, etc.) in certain circumstances, and judging the behavior of oneself and others in certain ways. However, to be able to pick out moral men or moral behavior is not yet to have a concept clearly enough in mind to carry out philosophical investigation. The philosopher's job is to articulate that concept. It is here that psychology can play an important role.

One might try to give behavioral descriptions of moral human beings, but this is unlikely to be sufficient since we would not have made clear the developmental factors which produce the behavior, and it is these factors which very likely might involve freedom (or a belief in it). Developmental psychology, however, suggests another way of formulating the concept of being moral, and, in fact, supplies a large part of the content of the concept.

Men are moral because they have become moral, and they have become moral by having undergone a certain development which is describable by psychological laws. Hence to find out what is presupposed by being moral, find out what is involved in the process of moral development. Hence a psychological theory of moral development (if it is the correct one) supplies to the philosopher a workable and fruitful concept of being moral.

The special value of forming the concept in this way is this: Not only will the philosopher be talking about moral human beings, since they are the ones who have undergone the process, but also he will be made aware of the various developmental factors which produce moral human beings. Such knowledge will make the conceptual investigation much sounder, since no "hidden" features which might presuppose human freedom or a belief in it will be likely to have been omitted.

In this paper, I will attempt to show that morality does not presuppose freedom and hence that men can be moral, even if determinism is true, by characterizing being moral in terms of a psychological theory of moral development, and showing that there is nothing in the developmental process which requires either that men be free or that they be-

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lieve themselves to be free. Of course, it is important to note that even if this argument is unsuccessful the methodological point still stands: One of the benefits to be obtained from applying science to moral philosophy is that of concept formation.

The first part of this paper is a sketch of a psychological theory of moral development which derives mainly from the work of John Rawls and Jean Piaget. In the second section it is shown that the truth of the relevant psychological laws would be unaffected by the truth of the determinism and that there is nothing in the statement of the antecedent conditions for the application of these laws which requires that men be free or believe themselves to be free. The third part treats of possible objections to this view, and the last section is summary.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

The psychological theory which I will present is drawn from John Rawls's "The Sense of Justice."¹ Two things should be noted: Rawls points out that this theory is only meant as a hypothetical account. However, I feel that it is close enough to the results of, for example, Jean Piaget, that it represents a plausible account of moral development.² It may need modification in detail, but the modifications should not affect my argument. Second, the theory deals with the sense of justice only. However, I see no reason to assume that a more general theory might not be worked out to cover all moral development. I use Rawls's theory because it represents a plausible account in which the philosophical implications of moral development are made clear. As noted above, however, even if the psychological theory turns out to be incorrect, the method which this paper embodies of using a scientific theory to form a concept for philosophic investigation is still sound.

Rawls gives three laws which describe the development in a person of the sense of justice. They are (I list them in the order in which they apply to a person in the normal course of things):

1. A child, moved by certain instincts and regulated (if at all) by rational self-love, will come to love, and to recognize the love of, the parent if the parent manifestly loves the child.
2. If a person's capacity for fellow-feeling has been realized in accordance with the first law, then, where another, engaged with him in a joint activity known to satisfy certain principles of justice, with evident intention lives up to his duty of fair play, friendly feelings toward him develop—as well as feelings of mutual trust and confidence.³
3. Given that the attitudes of love and trust, friendly feelings and mutual respect have been generated in accordance with the two previous psycho-

logical laws, then, if a person and his associates are the beneficiaries of a successful and enduring institution or scheme of cooperation known to satisfy certain principles of justice, they will acquire a sense of justice.⁴

It should be added, to complete the account, that persons with a sense of justice so formed will in general do their duty in particular cases. To substantiate this, a more detailed account of the sense of justice would be needed, but even without it it is plausible to assume that the psychological mechanism described here would be an adequate account of moral motivation.

Of course, this is not the only plausible set of laws which would describe moral development. For example, one might use Piaget's more general formulations.⁵ These, however, being limited to children, do not take into account so explicitly the final stage. Similar types of laws might be worked out to govern the acquisition of a sense of shame, and these would involve notions like self-respect. The force of my argument, however, would not be affected by this.

IS FREEDOM NECESSARY FOR MORALITY?

Two questions must be answered. First, does the truth of these laws (or of some set closely related to them) presuppose either that men are free or that men believe they are free? That is, is determinism or a belief in determinism incompatible with the truth of these laws? Second, is it a necessary condition for these laws, to be applicable to a given person, that the person be free or believe that he is? If the answer to both of these questions is no, then it follows (given the correctness and adequacy of the laws) that men can be moral even if they are not free and believe that they are not free.

With respect to the first question, the answer is obviously no. These laws might be true even if everyone has a true belief in determinism. If they are scientific laws, they would have the status of any scientific laws.⁶

The second question is more difficult, for it can be argued that, while the laws would be true in a world inhabited by people who have a true belief in hard determinism, no person could ever be such that the laws would apply to him unless he were free, or at least believed he was free. That is, the law may be of the form "Whenever *C* then *D*," but a necessary condition for *C* obtaining is that the person in question be free or believe he is.

To show that this is not the case, each of the statements of initial conditions in the three laws will be examined.

In the first law, it is clear that a child can be caused or determined to have certain instincts and rational self-love. That is, there is no contra-

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diction in saying that a child loves himself and has certain instincts because of certain causal conditions. Perhaps the ultimate explanation would be in terms of neurophysiology; in any case a child can be such that law 1 applies to him even if he is caused or determined.

The second law is a bit more complicated. Certainly a person can be caused or determined to engage in an activity with others. Even if he believes he is determined to engage in it, this need have no effect on the fact that he does engage in it.⁷

One might object that no *action* can be determined, but I find this highly implausible. Whether a person does something or not is one question, whether it is determined that he do it is in general another question. It may well be true to argue that a child who is caused to engage in an activity is not responsible for engaging in it. This is, however, irrelevant. All that is in question is whether or not he could engage in it, and I do not see that determinism would be a barrier.

Two further points remain with respect to law 2. First, can a person who is determined come to recognize that an activity satisfies certain principles of justice?⁸ The answer is yes, since there is nothing incoherent in supposing a person can be caused to recognize that some activity is fair. Second, can the person know that the other fellow has an intention to live up to the duty of fair play? The answer here is also yes, since whether a person is determined to recognize an intention or not does not affect the recognition of the intention. Hence, in the case of law 2, there is nothing in the statement of initial conditions which would preclude the law from applying to a person who had a true belief in determinism.

The first two laws state that, given certain conditions, a person will acquire such feelings as love, trust, mutual respect. Of course these are not morally neutral, for, as Rawls has shown, a person who loves will be liable to feelings of guilt should the bond be breached.⁹ The same obtains with regard to mutual respect. Hence it might be argued that the discussion so far has not taken into account the moral aspects of these feelings, and that if these are taken into account, the need for freedom (or at least for a belief in freedom) will be shown. I will discuss this point below.

The third law yields no new problems, for a person can certainly come to enjoy the benefits of a system which he knows is fair even though it is determined he do so and he knows that he is so determined.

The preliminary result so far is that there is nothing with respect to the laws or the initial conditions embodied in them which would pre-

clude a person developing morally in accord with them, even if the person is determined, or caused, to do so and knows that he is.

CAN COMMITMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY BE CAUSED?

Before the thesis of this paper is fully substantiated, two objections must be dealt with: (a) Implicit in the operations of the psychological laws is the assumption that a person commits himself to one or another course of action, pattern of behavior, and so forth, and that commitment presupposes freedom or at least a belief in freedom. (b) All of the laws will apply only to persons who accept moral principles or have intuitive moral beliefs or are capable of certain moral feelings. From this it follows that morality must not be an empty notion and in particular, since moral responsibility is a central notion in morality and moral responsibility presupposes freedom, that the men to whom the laws apply must be free. If either of these objections is successful, the argument of this paper fails.

The first objection can be expanded in this way. With respect to law 2, the mere intellectual recognition of the fairness of an activity is not sufficient to explain why a person would develop feelings of mutual trust and respect. It must be that the person has adopted the principles of fairness or justice, and this is something that requires freedom. Similarly with respect to law 3, a person with a sense of justice is one who, among other things, will accept those institutions which he believes are just and from which he has benefited. But acceptance in this sense presupposes freedom. The argument is that one who commits himself, say, by uttering the phrase "I promise," is excused if it is found that he was determined to utter the words because, perhaps, a drug was administered to him. Hence, if determinism were true, all commitments would be void, and therefore no one could be such that law 2 or law 3 ever applied to him. That is, the correctness of the psychological account presupposes that men are free.

This argument fails for two reasons. First, if it is designed to show that no person is morally responsible for becoming moral, it may be correct, but then it is irrelevant. Not until a person acquires a sense of justice (and other comparable degrees of moral maturity) is he a fully moral being. Hence, to blame someone morally for not achieving this state would be quite inappropriate. One is not morally responsible for becoming a being who is capable of being morally responsible. Second, it is false to say that one is never responsible for doing something if he is determined by antecedent conditions to do it. For example, I may promise to meet you for lunch tomorrow, believing (perhaps correctly)

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that I am determined causally to promise, and yet feel responsible to meet you. Of course, I probably would not feel that way if I discovered that I had been drugged. The point is that I have taken responsibility for my meeting you in the one case and not in the other. Whether a person has taken responsibility may be discovered, not by looking into him to see if the act is really free in some metaphysical sense, but by seeing how he reacts if he fails to meet his self-imposed obligation. For example, does he apologize, does he attempt to make up for any damage his absence may have caused? That is, does he feel guilty? If he does, then he has taken responsibility; if not, barring a special explanation, he has not. It is a contingent fact that most people most of the time fulfill their commitments. The psychological laws (1-3) describe a mechanism through which this occurs. So far, we see that there is no incompatibility between this psychological account and determinism. It is possible to commit oneself, even if one has a true belief in determinism, since to do so is to become disposed to act and feel in certain ways. Hence, the fact that the laws involve commitments does not affect the question of the truth of determinism.

The second argument is that the psychological account presupposes certain moral principles adopted (at least intuitively) by the persons in question, and since one cannot have a morality without being free (or at least believing oneself free), the psychological account presupposes freedom. It is tempting to reply that this argument begs the question, since, if the view presented in this paper is correct, morality does not presuppose freedom. Hence to assert that it does is to disregard the argument already presented. However, matters are not quite so simple. For moral development does involve a person's recognizing certain moral notions, such as that of justice or fairness, as applicable in certain situations (see laws 2 and 3). If these moral notions presuppose some system of moral principles, and this system was applicable only if men were free or believed they were, moral development would not be compatible with a true belief in determinism.

One may, however, give three other replies to the argument. First, the burden is upon the objector to show that every set of moral principles which could make up a satisfactory moral system presupposes freedom. Second, as was shown in the reply to the first argument, there is an important sense of responsibility, namely, taking responsibility, which is compatible with a lack of freedom; therefore, even if morality does presuppose responsibility, it does not presuppose freedom. Third, one could sketch a system of moral principles which does not presuppose that men are free. I imagine that several moral systems from the history

of philosophy satisfy this condition. An ideal contractarian system embodying Rawls's principles of justice would be a good candidate.¹⁰ I conclude, then, that it is possible to find a system of moral principles which would not presuppose that men are free, and would, in particular, satisfy the demands for moral principles implicit in the psychological laws.

SUMMARY

I have argued that whether or not men have a true belief in determinism there will still be moral men, for the psychological laws which govern moral development will remain true in such a world, and there is nothing in the antecedents of the laws which would prevent the inhabitants of this world from becoming moral in the manner described by the laws. The fact that commitments are involved in the workings of the laws, and the fact that certain moral principles must be adopted (at least intuitively) in the course of moral development does not affect the argument.

As noted previously, the laws considered here relate primarily to justice. It is plausible to conclude that whatever the laws of psychological development are which govern the remainder of the phenomenon of moral development, a similar account can be given. Hence morality does not presuppose freedom. Therefore, studies of morality can be freed from the perplexing questions of determinism, and those philosophers who have been driven to say that man is free for fear of finding that morality is empty unless he is free, need not, for that reason, fear determinism.

Furthermore, this investigation has indicated the value of using scientific results in moral philosophy. While some moral questions may not be so easily treated by examination of concepts formed in this way, it is obvious that moral philosophy in general can only benefit from the results of science. Often the scientist can supply the material the philosopher needs to formulate his own questions in an answerable form. In this way at least, moral philosophy is no different from any other field of human inquiry.

NOTES

1. John Rawls, *Philosophical Review* 72 (1963): 281-305.
2. Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York: Collier Books, 1962). Recent work by Lawrence Kohlberg has indicated that Piaget's account may require supplementation. See Kohlberg's "Development of Moral Character and Moral Ideology," *Review of Child Development Research* 1 (1964): 383-432; and his

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"The Development of Children's Orientations toward a Moral Order," *Vita Humana* 6 (1963): 11-33.

3. These first two laws embody roughly Piaget's two moralities of the child: the one founded on unilateral respect for authority, and the other founded on mutual respect and cooperation. See *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, pp. 194-96.

4. Rawls, "The Sense of Justice," pp. 287, 289, 292.

5. Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, pp. 103, 355, et passim.

6. A compatibilist might argue that, while these are deterministic laws, they do not conflict with freedom. I will not attempt to give a critique of compatibilism here. Rather I will assume that it is an unsatisfactory account of the facts, and therefore will assume that determinism is incompatible with freedom.

7. It is not clear that a child at this stage can even formulate a belief in determinism. If he cannot, there is no problem for my view with respect to belief. See Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, pp. 188-89.

8. Rawls's principles are (a) that each person participating in the activity or affected by it has an equal right to the most extensive liberty compatible with a like liberty for all, and (b) that inequalities are arbitrary unless it is reasonable to expect that they will work out for everyone's advantage, and provided that the positions and offices to which they attach, or from which they may be gained, are open to all ("The Sense of Justice," p. 283). It is not crucial for my purposes whether or not these are exactly right. All that matters is that the participants know in some intuitive sense that the activity is fair.

9. Rawls, "The Sense of Justice," pp. 293-98.

10. See John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness," *Philosophical Review* 67 (1958): 164-94.