

Positive Freedom, Negative Freedom, and Possibility

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POSITIVE FREEDOM, NEGATIVE FREEDOM, AND POSSIBILITY *

IN the history of philosophical reflection about free or voluntary action there have been two main views, one that may be called positive and the other negative. According to both views, a sentence of the form 'He did *A* freely' may be equivalent to 'He could have not done *A*'; the views differ, according to one version of the contrast between them, in their interpretation of the latter sentence. According to the positive view, 'He could have not done *A*' means the same as 'If he had chosen not to do *A*, he would not have done *A*; and he could have chosen not to do *A*'.¹ I call this view *positive* because it equates 'He did *A* freely' with a conjunction the first conjunct of which, being a causal conditional, is an *affirmation* of physical or natural necessity. By contrast, the *negative* view may be regarded as negative because it equates 'He did *A* freely' with a sentence that *denies* a causal necessity, for example, with a sentence like 'He was not caused to do *A* by duress'.

In this paper I am mainly concerned to do two things: to defend the negative view of free action in a general way, and to offer some reflections on how we should defend the particular negative view that we adopt. It may be, for example, that we do not think 'He did *A* freely' is to be equated with 'He was not caused to do *A* by duress' but rather with some other denial of necessity. How do we justify our selection of the appropriate denial of necessity? In brief,

* I have been greatly helped by Professor Nicholas White, with whom I have discussed all the ideas in this paper; and I am also indebted to Professor Kurt Gödel, who has helped me clarify the views I set forth in section 1. But neither, of course, is to be held responsible for anything I say.

¹ Such a view was adopted by G. E. Moore in P. A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern, 1942), p. 624. It represents a change from his view in *Ethics* (reprint edition, New York: Oxford, 1949), p. 135, where he wavered about whether to include 'He could have chosen not to do *A*' as expressing part of the meaning of 'He did *A* freely'.

my answer is that, although we can show on purely logical grounds that *some* negative view of free action is correct, we must offer a moral argument in behalf of the particular negative view we adopt. This need to appeal to moral considerations in establishing our view of free action also shows, I argue, why indeterminism does not provide us with a tenable negative interpretation of 'He did *A* freely' when it equates that sentence with 'He did *A*, and his choosing to do *A* was not necessitated by anything'.

I

Let us begin by showing perspicuously that 'He could have not done *A*' expresses a possible state of affairs, by transforming it into

- (1) Possible (\sim He did *A*)

This sentence, I believe, is elliptical for a sentence of the form

- (2) Possible (He was *P* · \sim He did *A*)

where '*P*' stands for a predicate applied to the agent. Sentence (2) is in turn logically equivalent to

- (3) \sim Necessary (He was *P* \supset He did *A*)

in which the negation sign clearly shows why the negative view of freedom is called negative. And now let us reveal in a similar way the logical form of the alleged positive equivalent of (1). The sentence 'If he had chosen not to do *A*, he would not have done *A*; and he could have chosen not to do *A*' has the following form:

- (4) Necessary (He was *P* \supset \sim He did *A*) · Possible (He was *P*)²

What is the logical relationship between (4) and (2)? It is obvious that (4) logically implies (2), but not conversely; so they are not logically equivalent. But since there can be no doubt that (2) does express the possibility of the agent's not having done *A* and since (4) is not equivalent to (2), it follows that (4) is not an equivalent of (1). I believe that the negative view of 'He did *A* freely' is to be preferred to the positive view just because (2) expresses possibility whereas at best (4) logically implies a sentence that does. I might add in support of the view that (4) implies but is not implied by (2), that the logical law that 'Necessary ($p \supset q$) · Possible (p)' implies but is not implied by 'Possible ($p \cdot q$)' is as true when we are deal-

² In regarding the sentence 'If he had chosen not to do *A*, he would not have done *A*' as equivalent to one of the form 'Necessary (He is *P* \supset \sim He did *A*)', I do not commit myself to any view as to the ultimate analysis of contrary-to-fact conditionals; I merely regard a contrary-to-fact conditional as a conditional that asserts the necessity indicated.

ing with physical necessity and possibility as it is when we are dealing with logical necessity and possibility.

This ends my effort to show that if 'He did *A* freely' is to be interpreted as meaning the same as 'He could have not done *A*', and if this in turn is to be interpreted as meaning the same as 'Possible (\sim He did *A*)', then 'He did *A* freely' must be transformed into a statement of compossibility,³ i.e., a denial of necessity. If we do not adopt this view because we hold that (4) expresses one sense in which the agent's not doing *A* is possible whereas (2) expresses another sense in which that is possible, we shall be multiplying senses of 'possible' beyond necessity.⁴

II

Having argued as I have, I wish to add that it does not follow that 'He did *A* freely' must be expanded into the specific sentence

(5) Possible (He chose not to do *A* · \sim He did *A*)

All I have shown is that a person who equates (1) with 'If he had chosen not to do *A*, he would not have done *A*; and he could have chosen not to do *A*, may be unconsciously and inadequately asserting the possibility that is asserted by (5). But it does not follow from this that (5) expresses the possibility that we intend to express when we say that the agent acted *freely*. Sentence (5) may well be *true* because it may be that the agent's choosing *not* to do *A* did indeed not necessitate his doing *A*. This means that the agent's not doing *A* may be compossible with the agent's choosing not to do *A*, but it is not likely that this compossibility will be asserted by someone bent on showing that the agent did *A* freely. Obviously there are lots of states or events that we may describe as *not* having necessitated the agent's performing the action *A*, among them his choosing not to do *A*. It may be true that the color of Booth's eyes did not necessitate Booth's shooting of Lincoln, but this would not lead us to call Booth's act free. On the other hand, we might more plausibly regard the fact that the agent's doing *A* was not necessari-

³ The term 'compossible' is reminiscent of Leibniz.

⁴ It may be recalled that J. L. Austin once asked, "Are *cans* constitutionally *iffy*?" ["Ifs and Cans," in *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Oxford, 1961), p. 153]. I not only answer his question in the negative, but go on to say that *cans* are, so to speak, constitutionally *andy*. This represents a departure from the view I set forth in "On What Could Have Happened," *Philosophical Review*, LXXVII, 1 (January 1968): 73-89, where I treated both patterns of expansion as equally effective in expressing possibility.

The view I defend in section I of this paper is defended at greater length in a paper entitled "Ands and Cans" which will appear, it is estimated, in the issue of *Mind* for April, 1974.

tated by duress as constituting the freedom of his doing *A*. We might say that 'His being under duress did not necessitate his doing *A*' is the expansion of 'He did *A* freely', or we might say with Aristotle that some more complex statement like 'Neither being under duress to do *A* nor being in ignorance about what he was doing necessitated his doing *A*' is the expansion of 'He did *A* freely'.

Now the question arises: How do we justify our choice of the compossibility sentence (or equivalent denial of necessity) into which we expand 'He did *A* freely'? My view is that, because different people and different cultures may differ in their selection of the "right" denial of necessity, there is no one answer the absolute correctness of which is vouchsafed by logical reflection alone. Logical reflection shows us that 'Possible (\sim He did *A*)' is elliptical for *some* sentence of the form 'Possible (He is *P* and \sim He did *A*)'. It also shows us that 'He did *A* freely', the supposed equivalent of 'Possible (\sim He did *A*)' is elliptical for some sentence of the form 'Possible (He is *P* and \sim He did *A*)', but it does not tell us what predicate '*P*' is. Although it cannot be any old predicate, there are rival views as to what it is, and our choice from among these rivals must be defended, I maintain, in a *moral* argument. An ethical judgment lies behind our decision to regard or not to regard '*P*' as the predicate 'under duress'. A similar judgment lies behind our decision to regard or not to regard the agent's psychological and social history as relevant when we are trying to say what the equivalent of 'He did *A* freely' is. For let us bear in mind that the main, and perhaps exclusive reason, for deciding whether a man has acted freely is our interest in whether his action ought to be judged morally, ought to be called right or wrong.

Another way to make my point is to say that the decision as to what '*P*' is is based on a decision as to what constitutes a good excuse, and that is certainly a moral concept. The man has done *A*, and we have interpreted the elliptical sentence 'He did *A* freely' as synonymous with the equally elliptical 'He could have not done *A*'. This in turn, let us say for purposes of illustration, our society expands into 'He was not caused to do *A* by duress'. Therefore, if and only if the agent was caused to do *A* by duress will we deny that he did *A* freely. We believe that duress is the only good excuse, and only where it is present will we withhold moral judgment. But what if we are asked to justify taking this position? Why, we may be asked, should *this* be our interpretation of 'He did not do *A* freely'? Can we appeal to a logical analysis of the concept of moral judgeability? To no avail in my opinion, because I do not see how we

can extract our answer from the meaning of 'morally judgeable'. Can we appeal to an analysis of the meaning of 'free'? We might of course say that we in our society use 'free' in such a way as to make it necessary for us to say of a man who does not do something under duress that he does it freely, but this reply, like similar replies in other branches of philosophy, leaves room for a critic to point out that other societies do not use the word 'free' in this way. Such societies may cheerfully license the passing of moral judgment on actions that have been done under duress. Are we not therefore obliged to defend our society's practice on moral grounds? Won't we have to say that it is right or good to expand 'He did *A* freely' as our society expands it? And won't we have to deal morally with a critic who might say that whatever our society may have once meant by 'He did *A* freely', it is now no longer acceptable to regard duress as the only good excuse, and that we should add insanity or living in the ghetto to the list of good excuses? I therefore believe that here, as well as in law, our interpretation of 'free' or 'voluntary' must be defended at some point by *moral* argument. Too often it is supposed that, whereas lawyers use moral arguments for defining 'voluntary' in a certain way in a criminal code, philosophers who defend an interpretation of the same term in the theory of voluntary action operate in an entirely different way because philosophers allegedly defend their interpretation merely by analyzing the *real* meaning of 'voluntary'.

I can imagine some philosophers protesting that sentences of the form 'He did *A* freely' and 'He did not do *A* freely' are factual but that I must view them as moral sentences because I hold that we must defend our interpretation of 'free action' on moral grounds. To such protesters I would point out that on my view no negative expansion of 'He could have not done *A*' contains a moral term. Therefore, no such expansion of the equally elliptical 'He did *A* freely' will contain a moral term, even though I maintain that in justifying such an expansion we must offer a moral argument. Consequently, I am not forced to regard expansions of 'He did *A* freely' as moral statements. Here the analogy with the law is helpful once again. Even though the maker of a legal code may use a moral argument in the course of advocating a certain definition of 'voluntary', his subsequent statement, in accordance with this definition, that a certain action is voluntary is not thereby turned into a moral statement. No sentence is turned into a moral sentence just because a moral argument is used in defense of the decision to expand that sentence in a certain way. An analogous principle applies to defini-

tion. Pragmatic considerations of convenience may make it advisable to define a term in pure mathematics in a certain way, but that does not turn the pure mathematical statements containing the term into pragmatic statements about what is convenient.

My treatment of 'free action' is not like that accorded the term 'murder' by moralists who treat that term as synonymous with 'killing that ought not to be committed'. They, of course, are forced to treat the moral principle 'No one ought to commit murder' as a truism. But I am not forced to treat the principle 'No one ought to pass moral judgment on an unfree action' as a truism. I *would be* in this predicament if I were to advocate that the phrase 'unfree action' is synonymous with 'action that ought not to be judged morally', but I do not advocate this. Even if we accept the metamoral principle 'All and only free actions ought to be judged morally', we do not thereby regard the phrase 'free action' as synonymous with the phrase 'ought to be judged morally'.⁵ We may regard the principle as nontruistic and also regard the term 'free action' as a descriptive term. However, if we regard being a free action as a necessary and sufficient condition for being morally judgeable, then, whenever we present an expansion of 'He did *A* freely', we shall be thinking about which actions are going to turn out to be morally judgeable and which not on the basis of this expansion and our moral principle. If we hold resolutely to the principle that all and only free actions ought to be judged morally, we will constantly keep in mind the fact that any alteration in our concept of free action will have profound moral consequences, namely, consequences about what actions should or should not be morally judged. When we add insanity or living in the ghetto as a good excuse, we alter our conception of 'free action', and that alteration will lead us to say that actions we once thought *should* be judged we now think *should not* be judged. In this respect the situation once again resembles that in the law, which often alters the interpretation of a descriptive term to save a legal principle in the face of what might seem like an objection to it.

What I am objecting to is the idea that there is one interpretation of 'free action' which is the real meaning of that term, and that this meaning does not shift from one social or historical context to another. I realize, of course, that some philosophers might hold that, insofar as two societies, or two stages of one society, use the

⁵ For a defense of the view that this metamoral principle is itself moral rather than logical, see my *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper, 1965), chap. vii, "History, Ethics, and Free Will."

same phrase 'free action', there must be such a meaning that both of them grasp. I suppose, for example, that this might lie behind the notion that all the various different historical ways of identifying predicate '*P*' are efforts to say that a man did *A* freely if and only if he was not caused to do *A* by something "external." But I do not know of any successful effort to subsume, say, coercion, insanity, ignorance, and so on, in this way; and I despair of finding any. It seems to me that we make enough concessions to the idea that 'He did *A* freely' means the same to all people and all cultures when we say that it is generally held to be equivalent to *some* sentence of the form 'Possible (He is *P* and \sim He did *A*)', that is to say, when we say that a free action is an action that could have not been performed and acknowledge that different cultures will identify '*P*' differently just because they are, say, more or less lenient about what they wish to judge morally.

III

Having adopted what may be called a negative relativistic view of free action, I do not wish to conclude without saying something about one of the most absolutistic of all negative views of free action. I mean the anti-deterministic view that an action is free just in case the choice necessitating it is not necessitated by *anything*. Whereas I have urged the expansion of 'He did *A* freely' into a denial that a *named* state or event like insanity necessitated his doing *A*, and have allowed that someone else might mention another such state in expanding 'He did *A* freely', the absolutistic anti-determinist transforms 'He did *A* freely' into 'Possible (\sim He did *A*)', but then equates the latter with '*Nothing* necessitated the choice that led to his doing *A*'. The anti-determinist does not allow for a variety of excuses.

What is to be said about this in the light of my argument? Of course, if one is a determinist, one may merely say that *everything* is necessitated; but I want to offer an *argument*, one that may carry some weight with the anti-determinist. I want to point out the peculiar effect that the anti-determinist's view has on the principle 'All and only free actions ought to be morally judged', a principle which, I presume, the anti-determinist as well as the determinist accepts. The anti-determinist must accept this principle if he is to criticize anybody for judging an unfree action. But if this is a principle that is to guide the anti-determinist's practice of passing moral judgment, he must be able to apply it in concrete cases. It must resemble the principle that no one ought to kill, insofar as we should be able to *find out* whether an action has been necessitated by an

unnecessitated choice before deciding whether to judge it or not. But how do we find out whether a choice is not causally necessitated? I do not know and I do not think that the anti-determinist knows. What the anti-determinist does is to interpret the principle so as to make it unusable. We can all make use of the advice: 'His action should be judged because it was not done under duress and not done while he was insane'. But how about the advice: 'His action should be judged because his decision to perform it was uncaused'? We cannot follow this advice if we are not able to show that his decision was uncaused. Therefore, it seems to me, the anti-determinist converts a principle that *he* accepts into an unusable one.

IV

Here my argument ends. I should like to emphasize that my first main thesis: that 'He did *A* freely' is to be expanded into the denial of a necessity statement, is based on reasoning that does not of itself lead to my second main thesis: that we must select the appropriate denial on moral grounds. That requires additional support. And finally I should point out that, although my argument in section III against anti-determinism rests on certain things that I say while defending my second main thesis, my argument against anti-determinism adduces considerations that go beyond what I say while defending that second thesis. I point this out because, like most philosophers, I should like as much agreement as I can get. I am aware that my moralism, so to speak, will not enlist the agreement of those philosophers who do not regard the statement '*A* is morally judgeable' as itself a moral judgment and who do not think that the principle 'All and only free actions are morally judgeable' is moral in nature. So, much as I should regret their inability to go all the way with me, I want to remind them that they are not on that account bound to reject my contention that 'He did *A* freely' is to be expanded into the denial of *some* necessity statement; that is to say, they are not bound to reject my defense of the negative view of freedom.

V

In conclusion I also want to say something which, had it been said earlier, might have complicated my argument unnecessarily. But now that the method of my argument in section I is familiar, I can say what I am about to say without fear of confusing matters.

The view that 'He did *A* freely' is synonymous with the statement 'If he had chosen not to *A*, he would not have done *A*; and he could have chosen not to do *A*' is only one version of the positive

theory of free action. Other positive theorists have not adopted this view. They have held rather that an action is free if, roughly speaking, willing brings it about.⁶ Therefore I want to show here that, if we accept this other version of the positive view of freedom, we are forced once again to admit that the necessity sentence we use is an inadequate expression of what is asserted by a compossibility sentence. We must first observe that according to such a view a sentence like 'He is free to do *A*' is to be equated with 'He can do *A*' (by contrast to the earlier equation of 'He did *A* freely' with 'He could have not done *A*'). Moreover, 'He can do *A*' will then be expanded into a conjunction of the ignorant-of-fact conditional 'If he should choose to do *A*, he will do *A*' and 'He can choose to do *A*'. By an *ignorant-of-fact* conditional I mean a conditional that the speaker uses when he doesn't know whether or not the antecedent is true, and such a conditional is different from a *contrary-to-fact* conditional. But if someone equates 'Possible (He does *A*)' with 'Necessary (He chooses to do *A* \supset He does *A*) \cdot Possible (He chooses to do *A*)', we may argue that this sentence logically implies but is not implied by 'Possible (He chooses to do *A* \cdot He does *A*)'. Once again we have arrived at a negative theory of free action, and once again we are obliged to present our "right" compossibility sentence.

It is important to note also that if we equate 'He is free to do *A*' with 'He can do *A*', then, if we think duress is the only good excuse, we must express our thought differently. Now we must expand our sentence about freedom into ' \sim Necessary (He is under duress $\supset \sim$ He does *A*)', which asserts: 'He is not caused *not* to do *A* by duress', by contrast to the sentence 'He was not caused to do *A* by duress', which we used earlier. This difference is made understandable by the reflection that if we treat 'He did *A* freely' as synonymous with 'He could have *not* done *A*', we mean, roughly, that he was not forced to do *A*; whereas if we treat 'He is free to do *A*' as synonymous with 'He can do *A*', we mean that he is not forced *not* to do *A*. That is why in section 1 the compossibility formula has the form 'Possible (He is *P* \cdot \sim He did *A*)', whereas here it has the form 'Possible (He is *P* \cdot He does *A*)'.

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⁶ I have in mind here a contrast related to that between positive theorists who hold that a voluntary action is an action that the agent could have prevented or avoided by willing and those who hold that it is an action that was willed by the agent. For a discussion of this contrast, see G. E. Moore, *Ethics*, pp. 10–12 and chapter vi.