

Freedom of Will and Fate

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Freedom of will, in itself nothing but freedom of thought, is also circumscribed in a similar way as is freedom of thought. Thoughts cannot go beyond the boundary of the circle of ideas. But the circle of ideas is based upon mastered intuitions that can, with amplification, grow and become stronger without going beyond the limits determined by the brain. Likewise, freedom of will is capable of enhancement within the limits of the same farthest point. It is another matter to put the will to work. The capacity for this is dispensed to us in a fatalistic way.

Because fate appears to man in the mirror of his own personality, individual freedom of will and individual fate are well-matched opponents. We find that people believing in fate are distinguished by force and strength of will; whereas men and women who, according to an inverted comprehension of Christian tenets, let things happen (since “God will make everything turn out right”) allow themselves, in a degrading manner, to be presided over by circumstances. In general, “Surrender to the will of God” and “humility” are often only a cloak for the timid cowardice to confront destiny with decisiveness.

But if fate, as a limit-determination, still seems more powerful than free will, there are two things we should not forget: first, that fate is only an abstract concept, a force without matter; that for the individual there is only an individual fate; that fate is nothing else but a chain of events; that man, as soon as he acts, creates his own events, determines his own fate; that, in general, events, insofar as they affect him, are, consciously or unconsciously, brought about by himself and must suit him. The activity of man, however, does not first begin with birth. But already with the embryo and perhaps – who can be certain here – already with his parents and forefathers. All of you who believe in the immortality of the soul, unless you are willing to allow the development of the mortal out of something immortal or are willing to grant that the soul flies about in thin air until it is at last lodged in a body, must also believe in the pre-existence of the soul. The Hindu says: Fate is nothing but the acts we have committed in a prior state of our being.

How can you refute the claim that one has not already acted with consciousness for eternity? Out of the wholly undeveloped consciousness of the child? Can we not otherwise insist that our actions always stand in relation to our consciousness? As Emerson [sic] says:

Thought is always compatible
With the thing that is apparent as its expression.

Can a tone, in general, touch us if there is no corresponding string in us? Or, expressed differently, can we receive an impression in our brain if our brain is not already endowed with a receptivity for that purpose?

Likewise, free will is only an abstraction indicating the capacity to act consciously; whereas by fate we understand the principle that we are under the sway of unconscious acts. Action in and for itself always presses, at the same time, an activity of the soul, a tendency of the will, an object that we do not yet need to keep an eye on. In conscious action we allow ourselves to be ruled as much or as little by impressions as by the unconscious. One often says about a successful act: I've hit upon this by accident. By no means need this always be true. The activity of the soul continues undiminished even if we do not observe it with the mind's eye.

We often, in a similar way, think that if we shut our eyes in broad daylight, the sun no longer shines. But its effects on us, the liveliness of its light, its gentle warmth, never stop even if we no longer perceive it directly.

Therefore, if the concept of unconscious action is not merely taken as a submission to earlier impressions, then the strict distinction between fate and free will disappears and both concepts fuse with the idea of individuality.

The more things move away from the inorganic, and the more the structure extends, the more pronounced individuality becomes and the more manifold its qualities. Spontaneous, inner power and external impressions – its levers of development –, what are they other than freedom of will and fate?

In freedom of will lies, for the individual, the principle of emancipation, the separation from the whole, absolute limitlessness. But fate places man once more in an organic relation to the total development and requires him, insofar as it seeks to dominate him, to a free counteractive development. Absolute freedom of will, absent fate, would make man into a god; the fatalistic principle would make him an automaton.