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THE FIRST DISCOVERY OF THE FREEWILL PROBLEM¹

PAMELA HUBY

HISTORICALLY there have been two main freewill problems, the problem of freedom versus predestination, which is mainly theological, and the problem of freedom versus determinism, which has exercised the minds of many of the great modern philosophers. The latter problem is seldom stated in full detail, for its elements are taken as so obvious that they do not need to be stated. The problem is seen as an attempt to reconcile the belief in human freedom, which is essential if men are to be able to act morally, with determinism, the belief that every event is fully determined in all its details by the sum of its precedent causes. But even the meticulous Moore does not trouble to explore at length what is meant by determinism. He devotes one very short paragraph to the matter, and sums it up immediately afterwards as the view that 'everything . . . has a cause'.²

This is surely because he quite rightly takes it for granted that the problem is one that is perfectly familiar to his readers, and in particular that determinism is an unquestioned part of our basic assumptions. This has been so for hundreds of years, and while it is true that modern discoveries in psychology and sociology have made the problem more acute, its essence is still the same as that to be found for instance in Hume and Kant. It might be thought therefore that it is a natural problem, such as would arise as soon as any man began to reflect a little. But this is not so. The aim of this paper is to study one occasion on which we can say that the problem came into being, in the course of the fourth century B.C. There are a number of detailed historical points to be unravelled, but I hope to emerge with a 'probable tale' which will at the same time throw some light on the nature of the general problem.

I shall argue that Aristotle was unaware of the problem, although he accepted a great many of the assumptions which we also make. The Epicureans and Stoics, on the other hand, took the problem very seriously. I shall try to show that it is most likely that it was Epicurus who first realised that there was a problem, and how this came about. The evidence available, however, is too fragmentary to allow us to reach any final conclusions.

¹This paper is based on one read at the meeting of the Northern Association for Ancient Philosophy at Nottingham in 1966.

²*Ethics*, Ch. VI.

ARISTOTLE

There are several passages in Aristotle where he seems, to a modern reader, to be approaching the problem, but every time he finally turns away, with at best a simple affirmation of libertarianism, without seeming to be aware that there is any real difficulty. The very full discussion of voluntary and involuntary actions in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for instance, turns out to be almost entirely concerned with the practical legal problem of when we are to decide that a man has acted voluntarily and is therefore to be held responsible, and liable to punishment, for what he has done, and when he is not; while this probably gives us a glimpse of a kind of defence pleading current in Aristotle's time that seems to lead to determinism, it is clear that Aristotle will not take such arguments seriously.

The line of pleading I refer to can be traced back to Gorgias. His *Helena* has been dismissed as a mere rhetorical exercise, but Calogero¹ and Adkins² are surely right in supposing that it contains some serious moral psychology. Gorgias argues, among other things, that Helen is not to blame for her misdeeds, because she was charmed by specious argument or overcome by the passion of love, and in neither case was *she* the cause of her actions. Unfortunately there is little direct evidence that this kind of argument was used in actual cases, for few speeches of a relevant type have come down to us, but there is one case of an even more extravagant type of argument. This is in the speech of Andokides, *On His Return* (24) delivered about 407 B.C. He claims that it was his *gnomē* (roughly, *mind*), not his body, that was responsible for his wrongdoing, and that his *gnomē* has now changed, and should not therefore be punished, while equally his innocent body should not be punished. It is surely likely that between his time and that of Aristotle many such pleas, aiming at evading responsibility, were put forward.

Socrates' tenet that no man does wrong voluntarily seems to lead with few intervening steps to the view that no man is responsible for his misdeeds, and it is perhaps surprising that this consequence took so long to work its way to the surface. It does in fact do so at the end of Plato's life, in the *Laws* (860), where Plato is trying to set out a detailed law of homicide which involves the usual distinctions of unintentional, unpremeditated, and voluntary killing. This division commits him to the view that while some wrong actions, e.g. unintentional killing, really are involuntary, others have to be regarded as voluntary in an unqualified sense. But at the same time he says

¹"Gorgias and the Socratic Principle *Nemo sua sponte peccat*". *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, LXXVII (1957), 12-17.

²*Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1960), 125-7.

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that he cannot abandon Socrates' view, and he is fully aware that this leads him into difficulties. We need not follow Plato's attempt to solve the problem he has set himself, but we can recognise here an immediate forerunner of Aristotle's approach.

Aristotle's central point is clear, that all actions are voluntary which have their starting-point in the doer, and which are not excused by ignorance. Only certain kinds of ignorance are admitted as excuses, and even when ignorance is present, a man is still held to have acted voluntarily if he is not sorry for what he has done. What interests us is the side issues in which he discusses various relevant questions. At 1110a 24 he says that men are forgiven if they do something wrong for reasons which are beyond the limits of human nature and which no one could endure: this looks like a recognition that human nature sets limits to what it is possible for a man to do, but it is couched in very general terms and is followed by a typical Aristotelian piece of hawering, with the revealing term *isōs-* (perhaps) at the beginning. And it is balanced by the argument at 1110b 9 that we cannot say that when we act to obtain pleasure our actions are done under compulsion, because if so every action would be the result of some kind of compulsion. One should rather blame oneself *eutheras ton hypo tōn toiotōn*—for being an easy prey to such temptations. Weakness of character is *not* an excuse.¹

In Chapter V the limitations of human nature are discussed in greater detail. At 1114a 3 he considers the argument that a man may be the kind of person who cannot help, for instance, being careless. But, he replies, such men are responsible for having become the men they are, for they have persisted in bad habits. And only an *anaisthētos*—a stupid fellow, does not know that bad habits produce bad characters. At 1114a 13 Aristotle almost reaches the crucial point: 'It is not true that if a man wishes he can always stop being unjust and become just, just as a sick man cannot get better just by wishing to do so'. But we are not really on the road to *Erewhon* here, for Aristotle goes on: 'The sick man may be ill by his own fault (*hekōn nosei*). There was a time when he need not have been ill. . . . Similarly it was possible for the unjust and dissolute to avoid becoming like this. *Dio hekontes eisin*. Therefore they have become like this of their own choice.'

Finally, something approaching a determinist argument is set out at length at 1114a 32. 'Someone may say, All men desire what appears to them to be good, but over this appearance they have no control. According to what a man's character is, so the final good appears to him. If a man is in some way responsible for his character he will also in a way be responsible for how the good appears to him.

¹Compare similar arguments at 1, 111a 29.

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If he is not, no-one will be responsible for his evil deeds. The wrong-doer will be acting wrongly through ignorance of the end; . . . His desire for some particular end is not a matter of his own choosing. We must be born with an eye for a moral issue which will enable us to decide rightly and choose what is truly good. A man who has this natural gift is fortunate. . . . It is something that cannot be acquired or learned from anyone else. . . .'

Aristotle of course rejects this argument, glossing over some vital points with characteristic vagueness. 'If this is true in what way will virtue be more voluntary than vice? To the good and the bad alike the goal is presented and established in the same way, either by nature or something else (*physei ē hopōsdépote*). . . . It follows then that either the end does not appear to us as it does by nature but is *partly due to ourselves*, or the end is given by nature, but virtue is voluntarily, because the virtuous man does voluntarily whatever he has left to do in order to attain his end.' . . . And with the remark, 'We ourselves *in a way are partly responsible* for our moral character and it is because we have such and such a character that we set before ourselves such and such a goal', Aristotle takes farewell of the subject, blissfully unconscious of any difficulty.

I have suggested that the argument which Aristotle will not accept is the kind of thing that might have been heard in the law courts, but at the same time it has its roots in a wider debate that had by Aristotle's time been going on for several generations, the debate about whether virtue is natural or acquired, which we find already in the *Meno*. This itself was also, partly at least, a practical question. Men wanted to know how they could become virtuous, and the sophists, who lived by teaching, naturally tried to argue that virtue could be acquired by going to the right teachers. Aristocrats, on the other hand, would argue that virtue was theirs by right of birth, and could not be acquired by teaching. This is not the place to go into the ramifications of the controversy, but I want to emphasise that determinism as such did not enter into it. This is indeed surprising. It is clear enough from Plato that men were well aware of the importance of heredity and education in making a man what he is, but neither Plato nor Aristotle took the further step of accepting complete psychological determinism. Instead we get the kind of vagueness found in Aristotle's reply here. In effect he accepts that men are free, and concludes from this that complete determinism is impossible, without at all appreciating that the case for determinism is a strong one. Instead he glosses over the point with the vague phrases I have italicised.¹

¹Compare the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*. Plato seems to imply that

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In *Nicomachean Ethics VII*, the section on *acrasia*, there are further indications of how near, and how far, Aristotle was from the point. At 1145a 30 he admits that there are bestial people—commonest among barbarians but also to be found among the Greeks—produced by disease or deformity. This statement is developed with examples in Chapter V, and again it is admitted that some cases of depraved behaviour are due to pathological conditions. But the point is taken no further, and no general conclusions are drawn. Nor is this done at 1149b 8, the story of the man who was beating his father and said that his father had beaten *his* father, and his own son would in due course beat him. *Syngenes gar hēmin* (it runs in the family). An anecdote, and nothing more.

One further point is to be found in the *Eudemian Ethics*. In Book II, Chapters VI and VII, Aristotle discusses why it is that we say that both the man who gives way to desire and the one who refuses to do so are acting voluntarily. He answers that in both cases the soul as a whole acts voluntarily, and is the spring of action, even though one part of it is under constraint by the other. In the first case desire overcomes reason, and in the second reason overcomes desire, but these are both episodes within the soul, and the soul itself acts voluntarily. He seems to be on the verge of saying that we cannot use the terms ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ literally of parts of the soul, and to be treating ‘voluntary’ as meaning by definition ‘that which originates from a man’s soul’, so that any application below the whole-soul level is ruled out. Whatever *part* of the soul it is that originates the action, the action remains voluntary.

This is implicitly a rejection of the kind of argument that we have seen was used by Gorgias in the *Helena*, and again amounts to a simple reaffirmation of the libertarian view.

I conclude that Aristotle, while he was aware of most of the elements of the determinist argument, for one reason or another failed to put them all together and draw the—to us—obvious conclusion. It is puzzling that Cicero in the *De Fato* (39) classes Aristotle with Democritus, Heraclitus and Empedocles as a determinist. We can only conjecture what reasons there might have been for this in the material available to Cicero and his sources. On our evidence, Cicero is mistaken.

EPICURUS AND THE STOICS

It is unfortunate that our knowledge of the early history of the Stoics is so fragmentary, and that we have no agreed account of the relations between them and Epicurus. On the evidence we have, character determines choice, but again does not carry the argument through to its logical conclusion.

however, it seems to me more probable that Epicurus¹ was the originator of the freewill controversy, and that it was only taken up with enthusiasm among the Stoics by Chrysippus, the third head of the school.

The outlines of Epicurus' approach are familiar enough. He took over the atomic theory of Democritus almost unchanged, but introduced one significant new point, the swerve of the atoms, a slight change of direction that could occur without any cause. According to tradition this was to solve two problems for him: the change of direction would enable atoms otherwise falling all in the same direction and at the same speed to collide and so enter into larger combinations, and the fact that it occurred without cause would break the otherwise continuous chain of causation and so allow room for freedom of action by men, whose minds were composed of atoms and therefore subject to the same laws as everything else.

Unfortunately we have no direct account of the swerve by Epicurus himself. Bailey thinks it must have been referred to in the *Letter to Herodotus*, and there is in fact a suitable lacuna at 44, but our earliest evidence for it is from the first century B.C. in the works of Cicero and Lucretius. Both of them regard the swerve as a solution to the problem of reconciling freedom and determinism. The nearest we can come to it in the works of Epicurus himself is in the fragments of the *Peri Physeōs* discovered at Herculaneum. Among these are fragments of two separate books on the freedom of the will, unfortunately far too mutilated to make easy reading. But there is one passage (Arrighetti 31, 22, 12), where Epicurus must be referring to the doctrine of the swerve, saying that the principle of freedom can be traced back to the *prōtoi physis*.

In spite of the poverty of our evidence, it is quite clear that one main reason Epicurus had for introducing the swerve, or rather the swerve as a random, uncaused event, was as a solution to the problem of freewill. Unlike Aristotle, he fully appreciated that there was a problem. He believed in free will, because it seemed to him manifestly clear that men could originate action, but he could not, like Aristotle, regard this as the end of the matter. We may not think much of the solution he offers, but he deserves full credit for appreciating the problem.

There are now two main points to be cleared up: (1) was Epicurus the first to appreciate the problem, or was he anticipated by the Stoics or someone else? (2) If he was the first, how did he come to do so, and what exactly was the nature of the problem as he saw it?

¹For the fragments of Epicurus I refer to Epicurus, *Opere. Introduzione, testo critico, traduzione e note* di G. Arrighetti (Turin, 1960).

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(1) We may first of all dismiss the suggestion of Kathleen Freeman¹ that it was not Epicurus who introduced the swerve, but some other, earlier, follower of Democritus. There seems to be no reason to accept this, except the belief that Epicurus was not original enough or interested enough in physics to have done so, and that belief itself rests on a circular argument. More serious is the view that the problem was first discovered by the Stoics, and only accepted by Epicurus as the result of contact with them. Here again the argument is a flimsy one. The earliest evidence we have about Stoic views is from Chrysippus (280-204 B.C.), and indeed Bréhier² goes so far as to say that his predecessors, Zeno and Cleanthes, were not interested in the problem. In view of the poverty of our evidence about these two men this statement is perhaps too sweeping, but there is at least no positive evidence that they were interested in it, and it is Chrysippus alone who figures in the *De Fato* of Cicero. Finally I hope to show that the Stoic view is more likely to be derived from the Epicurean than *vice versa*.

(2) We now turn to the question of the exact nature and origins of the problem as seen by Epicurus. It has generally been accepted as a problem very similar to that of modern times, but D. M. Balme has suggested³ that there were important differences. He takes as typical of modern views the theory of Laplace, which he says is based on three assumptions:

- (i) Every event is the effect of an antecedent material cause.
- (ii) The same causal situation will always produce the same immediate effect.
- (iii) Every immediate effect is the cause of further effects into the distant future.

Balme argues that Epicurus accepted assumptions (i) and (ii) but not assumption (iii), because he took for granted the usual Greek view, also held by Aristotle, that motion was something that naturally dies out, and can indeed be seen to die out, as ripples die out in a pond. It would follow from this, Balme claims, that we could not say of the universe of Democritus, or of Epicurus' universe *without* the swerve, that given knowledge of the position and speed and direction of all the atoms at a given moment of time we could predict the whole future development of the universe. And it was not therefore this kind of determinism that troubled Epicurus, and that he attempted to evade by means of the swerve. He was only attacking the idea of a world in which *from moment to moment* the behaviour of

¹Companion to the Presocratic Philosophers, (Oxford, 1946), 302.

²Chrysippe et l'Ancien Stoicisme, (Paris, 1951), p. 187, note 3.

³Greek Science and Mechanism II', Classical Quarterly, 1941, 26-28.

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the mind was determined by ‘the random movements of atoms whose collisions and velocities were subject to no law’.

Against this I would argue that Epicurus certainly believed in the continuous downward motion of the atoms, and that while *we* are uncertain about how he thought the effects of collisions between atoms would work out, it does not follow that he too was uncertain. But we do know that somewhere before the time of Chrysippus the notion of a complete, thorough-going causal nexus had been developed. Chrysippus defined *Heimarmenē* (Fate) as ‘a natural ordering of all things so that one follows another eternally and decays in its turn in an unalterable concatenation (*epiploke*) of events’.¹

With this we may compare an Epicurean version from Lucretius:

Denique si semper motus coniectitur omnis
et vetere exoritur semper novus ordine certo
nec declinando faciunt primordia motus
principium quoddam quod fati foedera rumpat
ex infinito ne causa causam sequetur
libera per terras und haec animantibus exstat
unde est haec inquam fatis avolsa voluntas. . . .

(De Rerum Natura, II, 251-7.)

(Finally, if all movements are always linked together and always new movements follow old in a fixed order and the fundamental particles do not introduce any beginning of movement which could break the laws of fate, and prevent cause following cause from all time, whence comes this freedom living things have throughout the earth, this freedom torn from the fates . . .?)

We cannot be sure that it was this form of determinism to which Epicurus sought an answer, but the fact that it occurs as near to him in time as Chrysippus and as near to him in thought as Lucretius suggests very strongly that he did.

If we accept this, then we have to explain why Aristotle was so resistant to determinism, and Epicurus so impressed by it. The answer must surely lie, in part at least, in their differing attitudes to Democritus. Aristotle was indeed steeped in Democritus, and had a considerable admiration for him,² but at the same time found his system quite unacceptable. We can see why this was so. Aristotle’s thought was dominated by a teleological view of causality, in which the paradigm of what guides change is the tendency of an organism to develop into a certain kind of thing. This made the idea of a causal chain in which the future is entirely determined by the past strange and irrelevant. Indeed, in the passage where he comes nearest to envisaging the possibility of such a chain he does in fact reject it:

¹Aulus Gellius, *Noctis Atticae*, vii 2, from *Peri Pronoias IV*.

²e.g. *De Gen. et Corr.* 315a34-316a1.

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Will A happen or not? If B does, it will, if B does not, A will not. And so on, so that by continually deducting a portion of time from the future period, we will come to the present. (*Metaph.* E 1027a 32.)

At 1027b 10 the rejection comes: It may be determined now that a man will die in the future. But whether he will die by disease or violence is not yet determined, but only if such and such happens. It is clear then that it goes back to a certain starting-point, but this is not derived from anything else. This then will be the cause of whichever happens, and nothing else will be the cause of its coming to pass.

Here and in Book K (1064b 35) Aristotle takes his stand on the point that we know very well that some things happen *kata symbebēkos*, which is in opposition to *ex anankēs*, and that, in this context, means *causally determined* in our sense.¹ What happens *kata symbebēkos* is, then, undetermined.

Aristotle then had two reasons for rejecting determinism, (i) that some things obviously happened *kata symbebēkos*, and (ii) that men had free will. At the same time it is putting it too strongly to say that he rejected determinism: rather it seems that it was for him a non-starter. This is clearly in sharp contrast to the views of Epicurus and the Stoics, both of whom made valiant if unsuccessful attempts to reconcile freedom and determinism. There was in fact a psychological revolution on this point. What were its origins?

By far the simplest answer is that it derives from the atomists. Unfortunately conclusive evidence is lacking but in spite of Balme I would regard Democritus as a thorough-going determinist. The difference between him and Epicurus is that he was not worried by this, and probably never thought about the problem of freedom at all. And there is an important passage in the Herculanean fragments that takes us quite a long way. At Arrighetti 31, 30, 6 ff. Epicurus can be referring to none other than the atomists with the words 'those who investigated causes from the beginning with success and not only far excelled their predecessors but also those who came later', and it is these whom he chides, in this book on freewill, for ascribing everything to *tēn anankēn kai tautomaton* (necessity and chance). He must then have seen that Democritus was, consciously or not, a determinist, and that this position raised grave moral problems as it seemed to make freewill impossible.²

¹Elsewhere, of course, *ananke* means something apparently quite different. There is for instance the frustrating kind of necessity, inherent in matter, that results in the production of monsters or the failure of things to develop as they should. In this sense necessity is almost equivalent to chance, a point brought out clearly at *De Gen. Anim.* IV, 767b 13—But a monster is not necessary (*anankaion*) with regard to the final cause, but is accidentally necessary (*kata symbebēkos anankaion*).

²H. Schreckenberg, *Ananke*, (Munich, 1964), p. 123, accepts that those elements

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Two minor questions remain. The first is how we are to fit the fragments of the earlier part of Epicurus' lost book into the general story. Arrighetti claims, reasonably enough, that Epicurus is here trying to establish a distinction similar to that made by Cicero in the *De Fato* (9-11) between a man's natural constitution, his tendency to be more quick-tempered or cowardly than others, for instance, and his will, or power of decision, which may override his natural tendencies. This may well be so: it is clear from Lucretius (II 269-73) that Epicurus thought we could observe some such distinction, but the fact remains, on the evidence of Cicero and Lucretius, that Epicurus still ultimately traced the freedom of the will to the swerve of the atoms. How exactly he did this remains a mystery.

The second question is the position in the freewill controversy of the various logical arguments which were thought to be relevant. The earliest we can trace is Aristotle's argument—if it is Aristotle's—about the sea battle (*De Int.* IX, 19a 27-30). But it is clear from Cicero's *De Fato* (20) that both the Epicureans and the Stoics were concerned with similar problems, such as the 'master argument' of Diodorus Cronus (c. 300 B.C.) and the 'lazy argument'. In the *De Fato* such arguments are mixed up with physical ones in a wonderful way, but I think it fair to say that as purely logical arguments they do not lead to determinism or fatalism,¹ and that Cicero, following the Stoics, again and again connects them with physical arguments which if valid at all are valid in their own right.

The philosophical, as distinct from the historical, conclusion of my argument is twofold, first that it was possible for men like Plato and Aristotle to hold many educational and psychological beliefs in common with us without being aware of any freewill problem because they had no notion of thorough-going psychological determinism, and, second, that once the problem had been formulated it was appreciated by philosophers of many different schools throughout later antiquity as if it were indeed a natural problem.

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of the Stoic doctrine of fate which involve a chain of causation must come from the atomists. It is perhaps significant too that by the time of Diogenes of Oenoander (2nd Century A.D.) the Stoic term *Heimarmene* is used to describe straightforward Epicurean determination. (fr. 33, col. III, l. 9-14).

¹See for instance Kneale and Kneale, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford, 1962) 47-54.