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Essay on the  
Freedom of the Will



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ESSAY ON THE  
FREEDOM  
OF THE WILL

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ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

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tainty of a freedom of our will, in the sense that, contrary to all laws of pure understanding and of nature, it determines itself without sufficient grounds, and that its resolves, under given circumstances and in one and the same man, could turn out in this way or in the opposite way.

In order to elucidate especially and most clearly the origination of this error, so important for our topic, and so to complete the investigation of the self-consciousness undertaken in the preceding section, let us imagine a man who, while standing on the street, would say to himself: "It is six o'clock in the evening, the working day is over. Now I can go for a walk, or I can go to the club; I can also climb up the tower to see the sun set; I can go to the theater; I can visit this friend or that one; indeed, I also can run out of the gate, into the wide world, and never return. All of this is strictly up to me, in this I have complete freedom. But still I shall do none of these things now, but with just as free a will I shall go home to my wife." This is exactly as if water spoke to itself: "I can make high waves (yes! in the sea during a storm), I can rush down hill (yes! in the river bed), I can plunge down foaming and gushing (yes! in the waterfall), I can rise freely as a stream of water into the air (yes! in the fountain), I can, finally, boil away and disappear (yes! at a certain temperature); but I am doing none of these things now, and am voluntarily remaining quiet and clear water in the reflecting pond."

As the water can do all those things only when the determining causes operate for the one or the other, so that man can do what he imagines himself able to do not otherwise than on the same condition. Until the causes begin to operate, this is impossible for him; but then, he *must*, as the water must, as soon as it is placed in the corresponding circumstances. His error and in general the delusion, which arises here from his falsely interpreted self-consciousness, that he can do all these things at this moment, rests, strictly speaking, on the fact that in his imagination only *one* picture at a time can be present and that for the moment it excludes everything else. When he imagines a motive for one of those actions which he pro-

complicated combination and the calculated effect occurs without fail. The appearance of causelessness due to the invisibility of the cause is found just as much among the electrified particles of cork which jump around in all directions in a glass as in the movements of man; but the eye is not entitled to judge, only the understanding.

If freedom of the will were presupposed, every human action would be an inexplicable miracle—an effect without a cause. And if one is bold enough to imagine such a *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*, he will soon realize that in this effort the understanding is really at a standstill; it has no form with which to think such a thing. For the principle of sufficient reason, the principle of thoroughgoing determination and dependence of phenomena on one another, is the most universal form of our cognitive faculty, which, according to the difference of its objects, itself takes on different forms. But here we are supposed to think something which determines without being determined, which depends on nothing, but on which the other depends. This other, without any necessity, and consequently without any ground, produces A now, whereas it could just as well produce B, or C, or D. Furthermore, it could do this absolutely, under the same circumstances, that is, without there being anything in A which would confer upon it a prerogative over B, C, or D (for this would be motivation, hence causality). Here we are led back to the concept of the absolutely accidental, posited in the very beginning. I repeat: in this case the understanding is really quite at a standstill, if only one can bring it to that.

However, let us now remind ourselves what a cause really is: an antecedent change which makes the following one necessary. No cause in the world ever brings about its effect all by itself, or produces it out of nothing. Rather there is something present every time on which it acts, and it produces a change merely at this particular time, in this place, and on this definite being. This change always corresponds to the nature of that being which, therefore, must already have the force to produce it. Thus every effect originates from two

itself to the cognitive faculty as linked to time, space, and causality in a multiplicity and variety of actions. But precisely because of the original unity of that which manifests itself in them, all actions must have exactly the same character and therefore appear as strictly necessitated in each case by the motives by which they are called forth and determined in detail. Accordingly, for the world of experience the *operari sequitur esse* is firmly established without exception. Everything acts according to its nature, and its acts as they respond to causes make this nature known. Every man acts according to what he is, and the action, which is accordingly necessary in each case, is determined solely by the motives in the individual case.

The freedom which therefore cannot be encountered in the *operari* must lie in the *esse*. It has been a fundamental error of all ages, an unwarranted inversion (hysteron-proteron), to attribute necessity to the *esse* and freedom to the *operari*. The converse is true: freedom lies in the *esse* alone, but the *operari* follows necessarily from it and the motives. *From what we do we know what we are*. On this, and not on the presumed *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*, rests the consciousness of responsibility and the moral tendency of life. Everything depends on what one is; what he does will follow therefrom of itself, as a necessary corollary. The consciousness of self-determination and originality which undeniably accompanies all our acts, and by virtue of which they are *our* acts, is therefore not deceptive, in spite of their dependence on motives. But its true content reaches further than the acts and begins higher up. In truth it includes our being and essence itself, from which all acts proceed necessarily when motives arise. In this sense that consciousness of self-determination and originality, as well as the consciousness of responsibility accompanying our actions, can be compared to a hand which points to an object more remote than the one nearer by to which it seems to be pointing.

X || In a word: man does at all times only what he wills, and yet he does this necessarily. But this is due to the fact that he

already *is* what he wills. For from that which he *is*, there follows of necessity everything that he, at any time, *does*. If we consider his behavior objectively, i.e., from the outside, we shall be bound to recognize that, like the behavior of every natural being, it must be subject to the law of causality in all its severity. Subjectively, however, everyone feels that he always does only what he wills. But this merely means that his activity is a pure expression of his very own being. Every natural being, even the lowest, would feel the same, if it *could* feel.

Consequently, my exposition does not eliminate freedom. It merely moves it out, namely, out of the area of simple actions, where it demonstrably cannot be found, up to a region which lies higher, but is not so easily accessible to our knowledge. In other words, freedom is transcendental. And this is also the sense in which I should like to interpret the statement of Malebranche,<sup>3</sup> *la liberté est un mystère*, under whose aegis the present dissertation has attempted to solve the problem set by the Royal Society.

<sup>3</sup> [According to Deussen, Schopenhauer's editor, Malebranche did not use exactly these words, but nevertheless expressed the same idea in one of his writings, "Entretiens sur la métaphysique," IV, chap. XVI.—Tr.]

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