

CHAPTER THREE

Recognising the Necessity of Choice – the Philosophical Back Story

Fortune, which governs the world, has some influence where we should be least willing to allow her any, and directs in some measure the sentiments of mankind, with regard to the character and conduct both of themselves and others.

(Smith 2009, 125)

As part and parcel of the human condition it is necessary that we make choices but are the choices we make necessary (i.e. determined) – a quite different proposition? We need to consider at this stage the way in which choice has featured in the history of philosophy but, as we shall find, this most often consorts with the question of whether or not there is *freedom* of choice – a complicating conjunction and one, as we shall see, that just cannot be made more tractable at will.

The idea of Plato's 'Forms' will come into play later in the present discussion. His thought also provides a repository of interesting reflections specifically on choice and decision-making. In the *Republic* (1955, 183-93), Plato crafted a threefold packaging of choice and decision-making necessitated by different sources of motive and impulse to action (his, so-called, doctrine of the three parts of the soul): firstly, reason, 'making up your mind'; secondly, appetite, 'going with your feelings'; and, thirdly, well! thirdly, it seems to be what we make of it. It is at this point that Plato's real intention, perhaps due to translations from the Ancient Greek, is obscured by clouds of ambiguity. Whilst reason is calculative and seems to encompass decision-making and the power to act on it, and appetite amounts to bare, instinctive physical desire and the craving after things, the third motive *could* mean: (a sense or spirit of) indignity, struggle, self-regard,

self-control and self-assertion (perhaps, even, how we think we are seen by others). This appears to be the ‘Lord and Master’ effect of (re)establishing control of ourselves. It is a rebuke and an angry and indignant assertion of one’s self-respect after one’s own failure of some sort. It would be stretching things somewhat to call it conscience but such an idea does seem a close approximation. In effect, this amounts to an identification of moral conflict in the processes of choice and decision-making to which different character types are subject given that they are endowed with different powers. For Plato, the life of the common man, for instance, is just one long series of desires; to paraphrase, mad desires bred in the hearts of fools (364). In contrast, the aristocracy, having better things to do, resist being beset by such desires. We associate Reason (with a capital ‘R’) with knowledge and truth and the pursuit thereof but it also has practical responsibilities which it cannot afford to shirk. Plato’s plea was that man should be ‘ruled by Reason’ employing it to designate ‘parts of the soul’ where different types of desires are to be located and where a felicitous nature should come into play regarding choice and decision’. Nevertheless, Plato is always wary of this largely unknown region. It is a location an early cartographer might have designated as the realm befitting the description: ‘Here Be Dragons!’¹

Following on from this, Aristotle’s *The Nicomachean Ethics* (1998) bears witness that moral virtue implies that action is done by choice which, itself, is the result of previous deliberation. For him, choice discriminates character better than actions and with choice always being within our power, by choosing, in a moral sense, what is either good or bad, we are men of a certain character. He seems to assume that deliberation always comes before choice but then speculates that some kinds of choices may not involve deliberation. In his discussion of choice, he is also plainly exercised by whether such choosing is always voluntary. In Book III the connection between deliberation and choice is established but Aristotle’s contention would appear to be that deliberation focusses solely on means not ends. It is puzzling, as Paul Ricoeur (1994) observes, that Aristotle seems not to accommodate a situation where a person chooses an end point, in effect, an ultimate goal (say, to become a doctor). Ricoeur traces the movement from the virtues of character featured in Book III, where Aristotle is clear that choice is about means rather than ends, to Book VI which provides a more sophisticated model of deliberation and choice. Here, for instance, Aristotle’s case is that desire aims at a good action which is deemed ‘an end’:

The origin of action – its efficient, not its final cause – is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end. This is why choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect

or without a moral state; for good action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character. Intellect itself, however, moves nothing, but only the intellect which aims at an end and is practical. (Aristotle 1998, 139)

Yet, shortly afterwards he continues in this vein by insisting that ‘choice will not be right without practical wisdom any more than without virtue; for the one determines the end and the other makes us do the things that lead to the end’ (158). Now we see that the means-ends model has specific ethical content overlaid and is hard-wired more widely into Aristotle’s virtue ethics. However, as Ricoeur (1994, 177) points out, in other circumstances of actual experience and possible choices of courses of action, the means-ends model just does not suffice at all to explain the process of choice making. Jürgen Habermas has pointed out that since Aristotle a *teleological* model of action has been central to a philosophical theory of action, wherein the actor,

attains an end or brings about the occurrence of a desired state by choosing means that have promise of being successful in the given situation and applying them in a suitable manner. The central concept is that of a decision among alternative courses of action with a view to the realization of an end, guided by maxims and based on an interpretation of the situation. (Habermas 1986, 85-86)²

This arrangement can be seen to be extended by a *strategic* model, whereby the anticipation of decisions of other’s strategic conduct enters into the agent’s calculation of success in decision-making. He affirms that it is with this that decision-making systems appear in the world (88).³

Picking up on the legacy of Plato and Aristotle, the Hellenistic school of Stoicism, as we have seen, also prioritised the role of choice in human affairs:

Their doctrine was that man’s situation in a rationally ordered world imposes certain duties on him, and he is required to respond by choosing to do what is morally and objectively good. Choice of the right action constitutes virtue, and will lead to happiness. Vice consists in choosing actions which are contrary to natural law. (Luce 1992, 135)

The *logos* of the universe could be read by the Stoics as reason or, for that matter, fate or providence and there remains in their thought the tension between determinism and some degree of freedom of choice. We

saw in a previous chapter how Marcus Aurelius dealt with the idea of choice but he also thought through the necessary underpinning. He has actions conforming to laws of reason and refers to true principles etched into the mind and to duty requiring things of us – no guesswork being required when the right way lies before us. Moreover, his exhortation is to keep the ‘divinity within you pure and upright’ (Marcus Aurelius 2004, 12.26) and that ‘nothing human can be done aright without reference to the divine’ (13.26).

Later, others will take up as their problem the existential predicament of freedom to choose. By the first half of the seventeenth century, Descartes announced in *Meditations on First Philosophy* that he could conceive of no other greater idea than that of free will or liberty of choice. For him the faculty of will ‘consists alone in our having the power of choosing to do a thing or choosing not to do it (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or to shun it)’ (Descartes 1997, 166). He affirms that, when those things are placed before us by the understanding, we act so that we are unconscious of any outside force constraining us to do so. In order that he should be free, it is not necessary that he should be *indifferent* as to the choice of one or other contraries. Instead, however, the more he leans to one alternative, the more freely does he choose and embrace it for divine grace and reasons of the good and true increase and strengthen his liberty. *Indifference*, when he is not swayed by either alternative by lack of reason, is, for him, the lowest grade of liberty. It is God that has placed this will in him and he conjectures why it is not ‘perfect’ in recognising the good and true.⁴ The will, wider ranging in its compass than the understanding, is not restrained within the same bounds and extends to things not grasped by the understanding; the will is *indifferent* to these things and falls into error choosing evil for good and false for true.⁵ Yet, his attempt to demonstrate how freedom of the will may be reconciled with divine preordination (92) is characterised by evasion and beset by equivocation with a final recourse to a spurious proof in the guise of the actual working of our faculty to doubt (the Cartesian *cogito* itself).

Hobbes, for his part, conceives of a chain of appetites (desires) and aversions, hopes and fears, about which men *deliberate*: ‘Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter’ (Hobbes 1962, 122-23). Men think about the consequences of their actions and have the ability to foresee the effects of what they might do, be it good or bad. Deliberation presides until the deed be done or thought impossible; it being vain to deliberate about things that are impossible (changing the past, for example). Significantly, Hobbes refers to *will* as being the last appetite in deliberating.

(Here, there is some inconsistency in what he intends by ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ acts, which attracted early criticism.) Locke, in contrast, talks about the different powers of the mind to do several separate actions as a man thinks fit; the power of thinking does not operate on the power of choosing, nor vice versa. He is of the opinion that,

this or that actual thought may be the occasion of volition, or exercising the power a man has to choose, or the actual choice of the mind, the cause of actual thinking on this or that thing. . . . But . . . it is not one *power* that operates on another, but it is the mind that operates and exerts these powers; it is the man that does the action, it is the agent that has power, or is able to do. For *powers* are relations, not agents; and *that which has the power or not the power to operate is that alone which is or is not free*, and not the power itself. (Locke 1977, 113)

Yet, Locke considers a situation where ‘by a too hasty choice of his own making, [a man] has imposed on himself wrong measures of good and evil’, nevertheless ‘[t]he eternal law and nature of things must not be altered to comply with his ill-ordered choice’ (122-23).

What, now, of freedom? In fact, it comes to be characterised in a way we might routinely think to be quite its opposite.

In a great deal of the literature from the seventeenth century onwards, freedom as an idea is relatively straightforward. In the thought of Hobbes, freedom is equated with liberty which is deemed the absence of external impediment to motion, with right being liberty to do or to forbear (Hobbes 1962, 146; 204). A free man is someone unhindered in what he has a will to do. Hobbes is minded that: ‘from the use of the word *free-will*, no liberty can be inferred of the will, desire, or inclination, but the liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to do’ (204). He holds that liberty and necessity are consistent. In an imputed causal chain tracing back to God there is seen to be a necessity in all man’s voluntary actions. In a departure from Hobbes, Locke argues that freedom and necessity do not consist together and that a man cannot be both free and bound at the same time. In Locke’s case the ideas of liberty and necessity arise from the idea of the power to begin or to forbear and ‘the consideration of the extent of this power of the mind over the actions of man’ (Locke, 1977, 108). If the agent is able to do or forbear in any action determined by his own mind, he is deemed to be free; where this cannot be produced according to his own volition, the agent is under necessity:

If this be so (as I imagine it is), I leave it to be considered whether it may not help to put an end to that long agitated and, I think, unreasonable because unintelligible, question, viz., *whether man's will be free or no* . . . the *will* is nothing but one power or ability, and *freedom* another power or ability, so that to ask whether the *will has freedom* is to ask whether one power has another power, one ability another ability: a question at first sight too grossly absurd to make a dispute or to require an answer'. (Locke 1977, 111-12)⁶

Locke expounds on the range of confusion produced by the idea of free will. In his view, the mind has not the power to forbear willing and, therefore, acts under necessity; man is not at liberty whether he will or no. He seems to be proposing that man must exert an act of will to control will (volition), which would, in effect, constitute having done our duty. Freedom, for Locke, consists in being able to act, or not to act, according to what we choose or will. Terms like choosing and preferring, expressing the act of volition, signify desire as well as volition (117).

If there is some apparent equivocation on the question of freedom of choice in Hobbes and Locke, there is none whatsoever in their near contemporary, Spinoza.

Spinoza insists that 'men think of themselves free inasmuch as they are conscious of their volitions and desires, and never even dream, in their ignorance, of the causes which have disposed them so to wish and desire' (Spinoza 1955, 75). Hampshire (1962) is of the opinion that Spinoza could not possibly be denying that there is something to be found in our experience corresponding to the notions of 'will' or 'choice', and that a state of the fluctuation of mind commensurate with choosing between alternatives was not ruled out by him. Yet, as psychological phenomena, 'will' and 'choice' provide insufficient explanation if unsupported by the role of the necessary features of the natural order. Such ideas, as ordinarily used, appear to denote things free and undetermined. As Hampshire confirms, though, this was nonsensical to Spinoza, as it was only displaying our ignorance of the underlying causes of a person's condition. Contending that someone could have acted differently is a measure of the limitation of our scientific reach. In Spinoza's account moral praise and blame, of 'good' and 'bad', are irrelevant superstitions from which we can only free ourselves by understanding human nature causally as part of nature itself. The assumption of moral responsibility is predicated on the idea that we have freedom of choice and exercise a rational will; his contention is that we will abandon such fancy as our knowledge progresses. Spinoza's own theory of *conatus* is an attempt to set up a causal explanation of human behaviour in terms of the necessary laws of nature itself. Men,

necessarily pursue pleasure, not in the sense that they always in fact deliberate about what will give them most pleasure and then choose to act accordingly, but in the sense that their so-called choices, and their pleasures, can always be explained as arising from the *conatus* of the organism, its tendency to self-maintenance and self-preservation. (Hampshire 1962, 133)

Alongside this notion of *conatus* is set out quite the obverse, in effect: that we should be accepting of being detained by necessity. Malik has captured neatly the paradox contained in Spinoza's take on freedom and necessity, as it turns out, bearing directly on the question of choice. Spinoza's contention is that human action in the world,

cannot be otherwise and that freedom comes from accepting the system of necessity. But in accepting that the world cannot be otherwise, we are demonstrating that it can. Spinoza believes that we have a choice: either we can accept that the world cannot be otherwise and in so doing achieve freedom and demonstrate virtue, or we continue to rage against necessity, becoming trapped in our impotence, and prey to destructive passions such as anger, hatred and jealousy. The choice we have is to accept that we have no choice. (Malik 2015, 188)

Yet, it is ironic that, given his own deterministic belief system, Spinoza held that everyone should be free *to choose* the foundation of their own faith and creed. It is worth noting that this kind of paradox can be traced back as far as the Hellenistic world and features, most notably, in the thought of the Stoics. In his own time, however, Spinoza's uncompromising metaphysical determinism was reflected in his assumption that our scientific knowledge was incomplete and that its subsequent growth would be inevitably in the right direction for his theory. If, for Leibniz, in the later seventeenth century, 'all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds', the contrasting dictum from Spinoza would be 'that all must be as it is in the only possible world' (Hampshire 1962, 167). This itself appears not borne out by developments in modern science, with chaos theory and quantum mechanics, for example, making it far from clear that 'the only possible world' on which Spinoza's *Ethics* is based is any longer a realistic prospect.

Leibniz, himself, went on to contend that nothing is necessary whose opposite is a possibility for 'in the case of the choices that minds make there is no necessity' (Leibniz 1973, 109). The will 'is in a state of indifference, in so far as this is opposed to necessity, and has the power of acting differently

or even suspending its action entirely, both choices being and remaining possible' (39). Again: 'In things which are absolutely indifferent there is no choice and consequently no election or will, since choice must have some reason or principle' (215) – that principle, in effect, is discernment. God has decreed that in human nature man will always freely do which appears 'best' but 'the best' may appear among several things which are equally possible. Yet, Leibniz holds that whatever happens to a 'soul' is already contained in their nature or notion (23). Thorough and mature deliberation is required in certain situations before judging or acting, although certain 'souls' are destined not to avail themselves of this facility. As we cannot know whether or not this will pertain in our case, he leaves this option open for us: act, he announces, 'according to your duty, which you do know' (39-40). Interestingly, Leibniz insists that:

There is always a reason, that is to say a greater inclination, for what has in fact been chosen, which may come not only from arguments, good or bad, but also from passions, habits, dispositions of the organs and of the mind, external impressions, greater or less attention, etc. But this inclination does not master freedom, although it inclines it. (113)

Touching on many of the concepts we have already encountered in the present discussion, Leibniz announces quite startlingly in his *Correspondence with Clarke*:

I maintain that God has the power of choice, since I base it on the reason for the choice which is in conformity with his wisdom. And it is not this fatalism (which is nothing but the order of the highest wisdom or providence) but a brute fatalism or necessity, in which there is neither wisdom nor choice, that we ought to avoid. (213)

In fact, the characteristic feature of Leibniz's God is actually choice making, choosing through His goodness to cause the existence of the best. Through His power God chose the best possible plan ranging from *motion* to *justice* along with the rest of His works. As Hegel remarks, though Leibniz's 'Monad of monads brings things into being, it does so only by an act of judgement or choice' (Hegel 1971, 30). It could be inferred that to attribute choice, per se, to God, alongside His other omniscient faculties, is an anthropomorphic step too far. By its nature, having 'the power of choice' is such a pre-eminently human attribute – almost definitive of the genus. 'I' choose to believe in God or otherwise: God does not choose to

believe in ‘me’. For, if He does have ‘the power of choice’ and chooses not to believe in ‘me’ (i.e. in my very existence), does that mean ‘I’ no longer exist? Berkeley might be led to suggest that such a prospect is a strong possibility.

By the mid-eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw human freedom as an absolute value, characteristically comprising the freedom to choose ends autonomously and independently; for ‘the whole notion of moral responsibility, which for Rousseau is the essence of man almost more than his reason, depends upon the fact that a man can choose, choose between alternatives, choose between them freely, be uncoerced’ (Berlin 2002, 32). Yet, reviewing what Berlin sees as the tyrannical implications of Rousseau’s thought, he comments that: ‘There is no reason why human beings should be offered choices, alternatives, when only one alternative is the right alternative. Certainly they must choose, because if they do not choose then they are not spontaneous, they are not free, they are not human beings’ (47). Should they choose the wrong alternative (i.e. something other than Rousseau’s own option), it is because they are not in touch with their true selves. Berlin observes that: ‘The only thing which is ultimately wrong for him, as it is for Rousseau (though Kant is much more explicit and violent on the subject), is to deprive a human being of the possibility of choice’ (58-59). Rousseau, in common with Kant, saw that it is ultimately wrong to deprive a human being of the possibility of choice; it is the ultimate sin to treat a human being as if he was not the author of values. However, for Kant, as we shall see, this moral designation was an altogether more complicated affair. Perhaps it begins for him being rudely awoken from his slumbers by David Hume.

Around this same time, Hume had described the question of liberty and necessity as ‘the most contentious question of metaphysics, the most contentious science’ (Hume 1975, XIII, Pt I, 73, 95). He contends that: ‘By liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may’ (s. 73, 95). In effect, however, to Hume, free choice is ultimately an illusion: ‘We feel, that our actions are subject to our will, on most occasions; and imagine we feel, that the will is subject to nothing’ (VIII, Pt. I, 72, footnote 1. 94). Liberty is something we ‘feel’ but, as such, it amounts to a false sensation of freedom. In Hume, therefore, an ethics of freedom is largely replaced by an ethics of causation. For him necessity equates with the original constitution, uniformity and consistency of human nature and, thus, with character and motives. As Reason is unfit to handle the question of God’s role in all of this, it is Hume’s view that we should not try to

trace necessity to an inceptive move from that source. We might be left wondering whether this is meant as an ironical observation and whether he really is an out and out determinist?

If we were to hark back for a moment to the last chapter featuring the doctrine of providence, Hume provides us with a fascinating 'take' on the question (1975 XI, 132-48). In an amusing vignette, Hume's supposed 'friend' supposes himself to be 'Epicurus' in order to deliver a harangue on the subject of providence and a future state. Hume thereby distances himself twice over from the heretical sentiments he is rehearsing. How convenient, then, that the unidentified 'friend' and his alter ego 'Epicurus' should draw on Hume's favoured method of argumentation and refutation, cause and effect, to deny providence and the guiding of the course of a future state by a supreme governor of the world.

Before moving on to raise the substantive issue of Hume's quite novel view of causality, we need to take cognisance of the fact that he sets up his discussion of this question by introducing, in the first instance, the idea of chance. He remarks that 'there be no such thing as *Chance* in the world' (Hume 1975, VI, 46, 56) and that chance 'is universally allowed to have no existence' (VIII, 74, 96). In justification of this assertion, he appears to adduce our failure to recognise actual causes in the case of chance, which leaves A.J. Ayer, for one, unconvinced exactly why Hume is so sure of his claim (Ayer 1980, 70). In the actual text, Hume proceeds to discuss a very particular kind of chance that may be evident in the throw of a dice. This is chance as calculable probability as opposed to chance as an incalculable improbability. Perhaps, Hume lumps this second kind of chance, along with the rest of largely unproven reality, into the lumber room marked 'Viewing Opportunities Strictly Limited'. Though we might agree that establishing the provenance of this other type of chance depends upon there being some kind of metaphysical phenomenon somehow working itself out in reality. Terms that might be associated with this kind of chance are fate, fortune, fortuitousness (or its opposite) or, even, absence of design (God's or anyone else's). Perhaps, the first and second type of chance considered here meet up at some point and actually morph into each other. Certainly, both are in play in the ongoing operation of choice. It is possible that the 'bridge' between the two is chance as possibility or opportunity. Nevertheless, it was Kant's view that all use of reason comes to an end with the play of 'blind chance' (1952, 312). With that observation we need to return to the legacy of Hume's view of causality, about which Kant, too, has something to say.

In order to account for our experience of cause and effect, Hume had carried across to the physical/material world a social-cum-psychological explanation comprised of custom and habit (by implication, the background

of our expectation of the cause/effect ‘effect’ is based prior experience). What Hume seems to have done is to hive off what we see and infer will happen (with billiard balls in motion one to another being his favourite example) from what will happen in the physical world determined by the laws of physics. If Adam had really been schooled in science (Hume 1962, Appendix A, 343), he would have been able to predict the aforesaid motion of one ball hitting another as a process of cause and effect, even without ever having seen a game of billiards. Though this does not fully invalidate Hume’s psychological theory, Kant, in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, maintains that as a result causality becomes a useless, theoretically impossible notion having entirely lost its significance (Kant 1952, 314). His critique of Hume is to marked effect (see 312-14), with the alternative being to embed in the understanding a range of categories that, taken together, frame the possibility of all knowledge and gauge our actual experience of reality – in other words, the mind structures experience for us. As a category of the operation of mind, judgement is the actual condition of causality. In this one move Kant is compromising Hume’s position on cause and effect by turning the direction of influence of Hume’s world-to-mind sequence into his own trajectory of mind-to-world. Hume, ‘this acute writer’ (313), had, however, failed conspicuously to persuade Kant, who systematically proposed an alternative.

Whilst Hume cannot establish cause or cause in the case of his notion of impressions that constitute our first order perceptions, for Kant man’s actions in the moral realm take place not because they were determined by empirical causes but because they were determined by grounds of reason. What is not in question, however, is that Hume, famously, contended that we cannot derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’, an assumption which Kant was to largely endorse but how he proposed to work around it was a radical departure. Kant maintains that the ought expresses a connection and necessity not found in nature and without meaning in its course. No natural sensuous impulses can give rise to the ought. The ought of reason confronts volition with a limit and an ideal – forbidding and authorising; what the law is telling him unconditionally that he *ought* to do, then it must be down to man to judge that he can actually deliver. In all of this, Kant is assuming that he is reconciling determinism with freedom in an attempt to circumvent a Humean kind of determinism. It is worth noting that in his book, *Choice*, Donagan remarks that, in dealing with Hume’s legacy, Kant’s influence was unfortunate. Though he supposed that there actually are acts of will, he concurred with Hume that they do not belong in the outer and inner sense of the phenomenal world,

either in the starry heavens above, or in the flow of consciousness within, both inexorably governed by the laws of nature. They belong in the noumenal realm that is beyond space and time, and which is feebly governed by the moral law. It cannot be denied that if they belong there, they are mysterious indeed. If postulating a noumenal realm distinct from that which our senses disclose to us is the only way of saving the pre-Humean theory of will, then few will choose to save it, even among philosophers who are unpersuaded by Hume. (Donagan 1987, 139-40)

We need to proceed, in the next chapter, to consider the implications for choice of positing this noumenal and phenomenal divide.

SAMPLE