William Meehan
10 Funston Ave
The Presidio
San Francisco, CA 94129
wmmeehan@sbcglobal.net

Theological Roots of Psychological and Natural Philosophic Discourse
About Free Will and Agency[1]

Abstract

There is good historical evidence that the quest for certainty that marked early modern natural philosophy was, in part, a direct response to the crisis of intellectual, political and moral authority that followed the Europe-wide religious reformation of the 16th century. One aspect of that religious controversy was a dispute about human agency, with many of the reformers proposing that individual actions had no effect on the ultimate welfare of souls – the doctrine of "predestination". The purpose of this talk is to explore ways in which this theological debate informed 17th and 18th century natural models of human behavior and the variety of ways in which they tried to conceptualize human agency against the background of this determinism.

Introduction

I began this project with the notion that there would be a link between the confessional backgrounds of early modern philosophers and their positions on free will. While working on the paper, however, I became more interested in the correlation between the Reformation itself and changes in both religious and philosophical notions of free will.

The time frame I am talking about here is that marked off by John Bossy (1985) in his book *Christianity in the West:* 1400 – 1700[2]. I intend to argue that

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[1] Presented, in abbreviated form, at the Midwinter Conference of the Society for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology. Miami, Fla., February 27, 2010.

[2] The time frame, of course is not a rigid one. The spirituality of the Franciscan order, for example, was both urban and individualistic and Francis was active in the 12th century, also, witchcraft panics which showed anxiety about social cohesion, continued well into the 18th.

the cultural changes – first religious then intellectual – that occurred over this period reflect the radical change in social conditions. And the approach I will be taking is a Naturalistic one that combines both Spinozan (1985/1677) and Durkheimian (1815) elements. My Spinozan assumption is that what people experience as sacred is a reflection of some totality. In its Durkheimian incarnation this whole is seen as the social group to which they belong, and the power available to the group, over-and-above the sum of the individuals' isolated competencies.

Society and religion

In theology, which is where I want to begin, Bossy (1985) describes this change as a transition from a religion of the people to a religion of the book. What Bossy means by calling pre-1400 Christianity a Religion of the People is that, whatever the Curia in Rome thought, as a practical matter Christianity was about the relatively unchanging agricultural communities that made up the bulk of Christendom. Connection to the sacred was established through the immediate and inescapable social groups in villages that people often never left and, religion functioned to minimize social discord and protect against disruptive forces in this intimate village society. Sacraments like Baptism and the Eucharist, for example, worked to enlarge and strengthen Kinship groups and to mitigate the effects of feuds. And, as Charles Taylor (2007) points out, religious rituals, like processions, were intended to protect the community against external dangers, both natural and supernatural. There was, in Clifford Geertz's (1973) conception, an extension of the social into the natural world.

For the individual, this sort of religion was less a matter of doctrinal conformity than of participation in ritual and ortho-praxis. The key psychological impact of such a socio-religious system is that, because the sacred is identified with a local historically stable social group, the individual can take his or her embeddedness within the group and connection to the sacred more or less for

granted. It is, after all, fairly self evident in such small societies that each person's capacities and actions are part of the total efficacy of the group.

Christianity's transformation into a Religion of the Book occurred in conjunction with the rise of new, less intimate social arrangements: cities and geographically extended craft guilds, as well as an increase in non-agricultural employment. Social life is less organic and "given" in such settings and connection to the sacred is not a given, as it is in the static village. As William Bouwsma (1988) has described, the individual's relationship with God becomes fraught with anxiety; connections to both sacred and profane manifestations of society requires volition in a way that encourages a far more explicit and abstract sense of "will" than was suggested in more organic communities.

An epoch of transition, such as Bossy and Bouwsma describe, calls for religious forms that address this anxiety (Bouwsma 1988, 2000; Luther/Tappert, 1960, pp. 115, ff., 122, 130, ff). Religious life had to become far more individual and, in the Western European case, to be mediated by the gospel (the Book) rather than by specific naturally occurring communities (Davis, 1981). The emphasis switches from ortho-praxis to orthodoxy. And the problem of explaining how individual human action can establish a link to the Sacred calls forth theological notions like the doctrine of predestination, which concretizes human will only to eliminate it from the drama of salvation: and, in so doing, relieves anxiety about the efficacy of the isolated individual's will -- conceptualized as sinfulness -- by assigning to God, all the responsibility for establishing and maintaining contact with the sacred.

Society and philosophy I (Scholasticism)

The religious changes that occurred between 1400 and 1700 were, as we know, linked to a far-reaching transformation of natural philosophy, including in concepts of agency and determinism. For theologically oriented philosophers -- which is to say most everyone before the early moderns – the main way in which the idea of free will is potentially problematic stems from the difficulty of reconciling it with God's omniscience and omnipotence. The typical Reformation

formulation, as I have indicated, is a denial of free will, at least not with respects to salvation, because God has foreknowledge of our actions and has predestined us to heaven or hell: a formulation which puts the problem in it's starkest relief -- particularly for theologians like Luther, who thought of human will as being essentially in bondage to Satan. (Rupp & Watson, eds., 1995)

The Medieval Scholastics were more relaxed about the issue, which they saw more as a question of agency than of abstract free will. As a question of philosophy, the notion of will in the abstract was a foreign concept to the scholastics who saw it as only one part of a combined intellectual/volitional faculty (*Suma Theologica* 1.9.1.1). Even strictly theological questions about the relative importance of human and divine agency seemed relatively unproblematic. Aquinas, for example, argued that, since God exists outside of time, His/Her knowledge isn't really foreknowledge but rather exists simultaneously with what He/She knows. (*Suma Theologica* 1.14.8 & 1.83.1.3). For Maimonides, who thought human action is caused by the individual's God-given character, the *Torah* was the solution. An individual's will might not have the ability to change his or her specific nature, but a person does have the capacity to follow God's universal law, which provides sufficient leverage to allow one to resist the impulses of one's specific character. (Gellman, 1989)

Society and philosophy II (Early modern solutions.)

For Early Modern natural philosophy the issue of will arises less from questions of God's omnipotence than from the omnipotence of efficient [which is to say deterministic] causality.

The Cartesian position on human will displays some of the complexities involved in the confessional linkage I referred to in my introduction. Though a Catholic, Descartes seems to accept the Reformers concretization of will as a faculty separate from intellect. Also, he side-steps theological issues by arguing, as a matter of natural philosophy, that both intellect and will are functions of a spiritual substance that he does not treat as subject to the laws of efficient causality. This formulation is, in fact, fairly consistent with the Catholic stance,

and, indeed, his division of created reality into mutually exclusive material and spiritual realms was intended, at least in part, to conform to the orthodox distinction between body and soul. His acceptance of the Reformers' notion of will, can be understood as evidence of the extent to which the Reformation had changed the terms of the debate, and his lack of a clear position on will is consistent with post-reformation Catholicism's efforts to affirm the efficacy of both human and Divine action in the drama of salvation.

Because Descartes's position was equivocal, it fell to Thomas Hobbes, an Anglican, to be the first of the canonical Early Moderns to fully face the problem of reconciling the Reformation conception of "free will" with mechanistic natural philosophy. In many respects Hobbes's solution to the question is the very opposite of the early reformers' approach. The latter attempted to solve the problem of relating individuals to a less coherent sacred/social whole by envisaging all power as emanating from God and assigning to Him (or Her) the responsibility of establishing the relationships between individuals and the whole. Contrariwise, Hobbes's political theory assumes the existence of a "social contract", which requires that efficacious individual free will be attributed to those who entered into the contract establishing the Leviathan (Hobbes's secular version of social totality).

Despite this difference in what we might call first principles, however, Hobbes ends up in the same place as the early reformers. Hobbes's social contract is established by the surrender of individual natural right to the state, and once that is assumed, the individual subject's relationship to this secularly defined whole is not much different from that of the Reformed Christian to the sacred. The political subject has no more recourse against the arbitrary actions of the state than has the sinner against the arbitrary God who declines to offer him or her salvation. And the reason for both Hobbes and the Reformers is the same – their attribution of utter depravity of human nature, whether in the state of sin or in the war of each against all that is Hobbes's vision of life without the contract. In the face of both Divine and political totalities, natural human beings -- whether unredeemed sinners or unsocialized individuals – are equally impotent.

We should note, however, that Hobbes's conception of abstract volition in the abstract – the last in a series of desires preceding an action [*Leviathan,* 6]– is not quite up to supporting the edifice of social contract theory. As Patrick Riley (1976) notes, it is only because the, rather cursory, treatment of volition in *Leviathan 6,* is separated by 34 chapters from his discussion of social contract theory in *Leviathan* 40. Still, given the novelty of what Hobbes was proposing, we ought not be overly critical of him for doing the best he could with the materials at hand, be they the misplaced concreteness of Reformers notion of volition or their convictions about the fundamental depravity of human nature.

Benedict Spinoza, who was not a Christian, was the Early Modern least influenced by Reformation theology, though he, like everyone else in Europe, was affected by the social changes period and by the religious intolerance that accompanied them. Spinoza completely rejects the misplaced concreteness of abstract will as understood by Descartes and the Reformers (*Ethics*, 1p32, 2p48, 49). For him, individuals, as parts of the totality of nature, are completely determined by the web of proximal causes that connects them to the totality and, in doing so, constitutes their existence (*Ethics*, 1p28). God, or Nature, is likewise fixed by the causal laws that relate its parts to one another – and to the totality – as to be incapable of doing or being anything other than what it does and is (*Ethics*, 1p33).

However, while he held no commerce with any arbitrary free will, Spinoza did maintain that nature as a whole, being *causa sui* was necessarily an agent (*Ethics* 1d1, 1p7, 14), and that individual humans, by consciously acting in accordance with reason, which is to say the laws of nature, could, in a more limited sense, be agents as well (*Ethics* 5p14-16). Thus for Spinoza as for Maimonides, agency resides in following the law of God (or Nature), though Spinoza's *Torah* is considerably more universal, and more universally enforced, than that of his medieval predecessor.

It is also worth noting that Spinoza rejected Descartes's distinction between mind and will, or appetite, (*Ethics* 2p48) arguing that passions could not be controlled or directed by force of reason, but only by the love of reason, itself a passion (*Ethics* 5p37).

The works of the canonical British Empiricists, Locke, Berkeley and Hume, belong to a more relaxed second wave of natural-philosophical solutions to the problem of free will. Locke, like Hobbes, of course is a social contract theorist and in the first edition of his *Essay on Human Understanding,* he had similar problems with his definition of free will (Riley,1976). In later editions he attempted to get around these, taking advantage of his rejection of Hobbes's strict monism to assert a formal distinction between mind and will. This distinction allowed him to claim that, in some instances, the mind could exert authority over the will, which suggests the possibility of reasoned assent to the social contract (Locke, 2.21.47).

This solution, like Descartes's, accepts the Reformer's anxious departure from scholasticism's confident assumption about the essential unity of connotative and cognitive functions. And, it is also worth noticing the anxious nature of social contract theory itself, which, as Charles Taylor (2007) has observed, was motivated by the social chaos generated by the wars of religion. A similar anxiety motivated Hobbes, and the same can be said even of Descartes's physics (Gaukroger, 1995). Yet Locke, had a considerably less pessimistic view of human nature than did Hobbes or the early Reformers. He did not see the state of nature as defined by either sin or incessant conflict and he did not require that subjects surrender all their natural rights to the sovereign power. This relative equanimity may well reflect a greater sense of social stability in late seventeenth century England; the civil wars of Hobbes's day had involved a bewildering array of contending sects while the only religious threat to the Glorious Revolution was Roman Catholicism, against which the English Crown had experienced considerably more success than it had with the island's homegrown sectaries.

As for George Berkeley, it is not surprising that a man who held that all human cognition is limited to participation in the perceptions of an occasionalist God, has almost nothing to say about human will, beyond noting its capacity to rearrange ideas in the mind (*Principles,* 28). Given that the young Berkeley who wrote the *Principles of human understanding* was to become an Anglican Bishop, it is not, of course, surprising to find theology infecting his philosophical works. His lack of concern with an independent connotative faculty, however,

seems reminiscent of the pre-reformation sense of confidence in the presence of the sacred: a confidence perhaps rooted in a new-found security felt by Englishmen of Berkeley's class about their pre-eminent place in re-established and social ecclesial order.

Alternatively, we might see this minimalist theory of connation as consistent with more traditional Reformation theology with its denigration of all human power in the face of the omnipotent, omniscient God of the occasionalist theologians. Following Bouwsma (1988), however, I have been arguing that this aspect of early reformation theology was a response to socially induced anxiety about the individual's relation to the sacred, and I don't detect much anxiety in Berkeley.

David Hume, who saw himself as a "moral scientist," gives us two definitions of free will. He says, in the *Enquiry concerning human understanding* (8. 1 & 2), that liberty, or freedom of the will, must be understood either in terms of the absence of constraint or as the opposite of necessity. These, it must be admitted, are remarkably un-theological definitions, the former being essentially social or political and the latter, since he equates necessity with causality, seems to present the issue as a question of logic.

Hume's political notion of freedom is of a piece with a political philosophy that explicitly rejects social contract theories. Hobbes and Locke claimed that participation in social contracts is freely chosen, but this is somewhat disingenuous. Such participation is inherently compulsory, as it is enforced by the threat of harm – the war of each against all or the state's monopoly of violence. Hume sees his social totality as arising, not from fear of violence, but from the natural sympathy and affection we feel for those close to us. Formal systems of justice in turn, are our reasoned extrapolation from the benefits of such natural sympathetic cooperation with intimates to the potential benefits of artificially enforced cooperation between and among strangers (*Treatise*, 3.3.1.16). Participation in such artificial systems is not voluntary. Citizens owe a moral duty of obedience to magistrates, and such obedience, when not given willingly, is not to be considered free.

Free will in the sense of action with a complete absence of necessity, is for Hume, an absurdity—implying a kind of randomness that would make a mockery of agency. Here by "necessity" he means causality, and while he was skeptical about the environmental antecedents of specific cognitive assessments of causal relations, he saw human intellect, in general, as a kind of naturally evolved[3] sense, on a par with more obviously affective senses like fear, lust and disgust. Such senses, he argued, have survival value – which they would not have if they didn't tell us something about the natural whole of which we are parts (*Treatise* 1.4.4.1).

Hume, of course, was not entirely free from the influence of theology. Certainly the theory of ideas, the acceptance of which is the cause of his skepticism about cognition, has theological roots. Hume inherited it from Locke, and Locke had it from Descartes, who, in turn, had posited a non-natural mind in compliance with Christianity's need for a strict division of body and soul to support its doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. But, in spite of this religious inheritance, Hume, like Spinoza, presents us with a fairly coherent naturalist account of human beings and human society, which is to say a picture of humanity's place within the larger natural whole. Like Spinoza he recognizes that intellect and will exist together and on a continuum with our other senses and affects. And, he expressed, even more clearly than Spinoza had, the fundamental naturalist insight that human society is rooted in human nature, on our sympathy for one another, and on reasoning based on such affective connections.

Summary and conclusions

The problem that free will poses for the early modern natural philosophers, and thus for the psychologists who have succeeded them, first arose, I would suggest, in the theological responses to social transformations occurring in Western Europe around the time of the Reformation. The salient features of that transition included an increase in geographical and social

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[3] See Monteiro, 1976 for a discussion of Hume and natural selection.

mobility, accompanied by the growth of both cities and the non-agricultural sectors of the economy (trade and handicraft manufacturing). These were changes that tended to disrupt traditionally static social structures, leaving many people to feel less connection to social groups, and thus to the sacred. Loss of social cohesion thus gave rise to the notion of isolated individuals needing to establish social and spiritual connections and to the idea of an abstract individual power to act of one's own "free will".

Reformation theologians recognized that such abstract individual powers are antithetical to the conception, whether social or natural, of a whole greater than the sum of its parts. They attempted to deny the existence, or at least the efficacy, of such abstract "free will" by condemning its exercise as sin and insisting that efficacy appertains to God alone. They believed that sin – in my terms social atomism and abstract will – is humanity's natural state and, they bequeathed this conception of human nature and will to most of the natural philosophers who stepped into the intellectual vacuum created by the irresolvable conflicts of contending theological opinion.

While not the only current in modern philosophy and psychology, this atomistic view of human nature has continued to have a powerful influence to this day, and it is this I think, that is responsible for most of the controversy over free will and determinism. If we think of people as discrete individuals, it seems difficult to imagine how we can avoid either reducing their actions to the cumulative effects of the external forces that operate on them, or to posit, with the libertarians, a special non-causal status for human will. Seen as parts, bound by causality into a *causa sui* whole, however, human actions, though not arbitrarily free, cannot be reduced to their prior causes but must be recognized as partaking in the agency of the whole.

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