

[INTRODUCTION]

... Human beings are [wholly] physical entities. However one considers them, they are bound to universal nature and are subject to the necessary and immutable laws that nature imposes on all the beings it includes, according to the peculiar essence or properties it gives each being, without consulting them. Our life is a line that nature commands us to trace on the face of the earth, and we can never deviate from this line, even for a moment. We are born without our assent, our organization does not depend on us, our ideas come to us involuntarily, our habits are in the power of those who cause us to acquire them, and we are continually changed by causes, both visible and hidden, that necessarily regulate the way we exist, think, and act. We are good or bad, happy or unhappy, wise or foolish, reasonable or unreasonable, without our will having anything to do with these different states. Yet, despite the shackles that constantly bind us, we claim that we are free—that we determine our actions and destiny, independently of the causes that move us. . . .

[THE MECHANISM OF DETERMINISM]

If it is our actual essence to tend to our well-being and to seek self-preservation; if all the movements of our human machine follow necessarily from this primitive impulse; if pain turns us aside from what we should avoid; if pleasure tells us what we should seek; then it is our essence to love what causes agreeable sensations or leads us to expect them, and to hate what causes the opposite sensations or leads us fear that they will occur. We are necessarily attracted, and our will is necessarily determined, by objects we judge useful; and we are necessarily repelled by objects we judge harmful to our permanent or momentary way of existing. It is only by the aid of experience that we acquire the ability to know what we should love or fear. Are our organs sound? If so, our experiences will be true; we will have reason, prudence, and foresight; we will anticipate effects that lie in the distant future; and we will know that sometimes what we judge to be good can become bad through its necessary or probable consequences, and that what we know to be momentarily bad can by its results attain for us a solid and lasting good. Thus it is experience that enables us to know that the amputation of a limb will cause a painful sensation; and therefore we necessarily fear this operation and want to avoid the pain. But if experience has shown us that the momentary pain caused by the operation can save our life, then, since we cherish our preservation, we necessarily submit to this momentary pain in light of the good that outweighs it.

The will . . . is a modification of the brain that disposes the brain to action or prepares it to put into play the organs that it can move. This will is necessarily determined by the good or bad, agreeable or disagreeable, qualities of the object or of the motive that acts on our senses, or the idea of it that remains with us and is supplied by our memory. Consequently, we act necessarily; our action is the result of the impulse that we have received from the motive, the object, or the idea that has modified our brain or disposed our will. When we do not act on this

impulse, it is because some new cause, motive, or idea occurs, which modifies our brain in a different manner, gives it a new impulse, a new will—and the will either acts according to this new impulse or it suspends action. Thus, the sight of an agreeable object, or the idea of it, determines our will to action in order to attain this object. But a new object or a new idea can destroy the effect of the initial one and prevent us from acting to attain the object. This is how reflection, experience, and reason necessarily stop or suspend the actions of our will; otherwise our will would necessarily follow the initial impulses that began carrying it toward a desirable object. In all this, we always act according to necessary laws.

[ANSWERS TO OBJECTIONS]

When I am tormented by a strong thirst and create an idea of, or actually perceive, a fountain whose pure waters can quench my thirst, am I master of desiring or not desiring the object that can satisfy such an acute need in my present state? Undoubtedly everyone would agree that is impossible for me not to want to satisfy my thirst. But someone will say, "If someone tells you at that moment that the water you desire is poisoned, you will abstain from drinking it, despite your thirst." And this person would falsely conclude that this shows that I am free. In fact, however, just as thirst necessarily was determining me to drink before I knew that the water had been poisoned, in the same way, this new discovery necessarily determines me not to drink. The desire for self-preservation destroyed or suspended the initial impulse that thirst was imparting to my will. The second motive became stronger than the first; the fear of death necessarily outweighed the painful sensation caused by thirst. "But," someone will say, "if the thirst is very strong, an imprudent person would risk drinking the poisoned water, without regard for the danger." In this case the initial impulse will prevail and will necessarily make the person act, since it will be stronger than the later impulse. Nevertheless, in each case—drinking the water or not drinking it—the action is equally necessary; it is the effect of the motive that is more powerful and acts more strongly on the will.

This example can serve to explain all the phenomena of the will. This will, or rather the brain, is like a ball that, although it has received an impulse that drives it in a straight line, is moved off course as soon as a force greater than the initial one makes it change direction. The person who drinks water that he has been told is poisoned seems to be insane; but the actions of the insane are as necessary as those of the most prudent individuals. The motives that determine the hedonist and the sensualist to risk their health are as powerful, and resulting actions are as necessary, as those that determine wise persons to manage their actions. "But," one will insist, "the sensualist can be led to change his conduct." But this does not mean that he is free; it means only that there are motives sufficiently powerful to destroy the effect of those that previously acted on him. These new motives determine his will to his new conduct as necessarily as the previous motives determined his previous conduct.

We are said to *deliberate* when the action of the will is suspended. This happens when two opposite motives act alternately on us. To deliberate is to love

and hate alternately—to be successively attracted and repelled, to be moved sometimes by one motive and sometimes by another. We deliberate only when we do not sufficiently understand the quality of the objects that move us, or when experience has not sufficiently taught us the effects, more or less distant, that our actions will have on us. I want to go outside to get some fresh air, but the weather is uncertain; hence I deliberate, weighing the various motives that press alternately on my will, to go out or not to go out. In the end I am determined by the most probable motive, which takes me from indecision and necessarily draws my will either to go outside or to remain inside. This motive is always the present or future advantage that I find in the action I decide to take.

Our will is often suspended between two objects, the presence or the ideas of which move us alternately. Before acting, we wait until we have contemplated the objects, or the ideas they have left in our brain, that call us to different actions. We then compare these objects or these ideas. But even when we are deliberating, comparing the alternatives of love and hate that follow each other (sometimes with extreme rapidity), we are not free for a single moment; for the good or the evil that we find successively in the objects are the necessitating motives of these momentary acts of the will, these rapid movements of love and fear, that we experience as long as our uncertainty continues. From this it is obvious that deliberation is necessary, that uncertainty is necessary, and that whatever choice we make after deliberation will always necessarily be the one that we have judged, rightly or wrongly, to be probably the most advantageous to us. . . .

Choice in no way proves human freedom. A person deliberates only when he does not yet know which object to choose, among the many that move him; he is then in a quandary that does not end that until his will is determined by idea of the greatest advantage that he believes he will find in the object he chooses or the action he undertakes. So we see that his choice is necessary, because he would not decide on an object or an action unless he believed that he would find some advantage in it. For a person to act freely, he would have to be able to will or choose his motives, or to prevent those motives from acting on his will. Since action is always the effect of our will once it is determined, and since our will can be determined only by a motive that is not in our power, it follows that we are never the master of the determinations of our own will, and that consequently we never act freely. Some have believed that we are free because we have a will and the power to choose, but these people have paid attention to the fact that our will is moved by causes independent of us. . . .

Some have believed that human beings are free, because they imagine that the soul can at will call to mind ideas that sometimes suffice to curb the most passionate desires. Thus, the idea of a distant evil sometimes prevents us from yielding to a present and actual good: A remembrance (which is an imperceptible, slight modification of our brain) destroys at each moment the real objects that act on our will. But we are not master of recalling our ideas at will: These ideas associate independently of us; they are arranged in our brain without our knowledge and despite us, making an impression more or less profound. Our memory itself depends on our organization, and its fidelity depends on the habitual or momentary state in which we find ourselves. When our will is

strongly determined to some object or idea that rouses a very lively passion in us, those objects or ideas that would be able to stop our action disappear from our mind. We shut our eyes to the present dangers that threaten us, the ideas of which should restrain us. We march forward headlong toward the object that draws us. Reflection has no effect on us, and we see nothing but the object that desires. The salutary ideas that would be able to stop us are no longer present, or they become present too weakly or too late to prevent us from acting. Such is the case with all those who, blinded by some strong passion, are not in a state to recall to themselves those motives, the ideas of which would alone would be able to restrain them. The trouble they are in prevents them from judging sanely, from foreseeing the consequences of their actions, from applying their experience, and from using their reason. But these operations suppose a soundness in the manner of associating ideas, and the brain of these people can no more do this, because of the momentary delirium it suffers, than their hand can write when they are doing vigorous exercise.

Our ways of thinking are necessarily determined by our ways of being; they therefore depend on our natural organization and the modification that our machine receives independently of our will. From this we are forced to conclude that our thoughts, our reflections, and the ways we see, feel, judge, and combine ideas are neither voluntary nor free. In short, our soul is master neither of the movements excited in it, nor of representing to itself the images or ideas that would be needed to counterbalance the impulses it receives. This is why we cease to reason when we are in passion: It is as impossible to hear reason, at that time, as when we are in ecstasy or drunk. The wicked are never more than people drunk or delirious; if they reason, it is only when tranquillity is reestablished in their machine, and then the tardy ideas that present themselves to their mind allow them to see the consequence of their actions—and this brings on them the disturbance we call *shame, regret, remorse*. . . .

In short, the actions of human beings are never free; their actions are always the necessary consequence of their temperament, their received ideas, their true or false notions of happiness, and their opinions strengthened by example, education, and daily experience. We see so many crimes in the world only because everything conspires to make human beings vicious and criminal: their religions, their governments, their education, and the examples they see—all these drive them irresistibly to evil. In such cases, morality preaches virtue to them in vain; for virtue would be simply a painful sacrifice of happiness in societies where crimes are continually crowned, esteemed, and rewarded, and where the most hideous disorders are punished only when those who commit them are too weak to have the right to do so with impunity. Such societies punish members of the lower classes for very excesses that they respect in members of the upper classes; and they often have the injustice to sentence to death those were made criminal by the public prejudices that they themselves uphold.

A human being, therefore, is not free at any moment in his life; he is necessarily guided at each step by the advantages—real or fictitious—that he attaches to the objects that rouse his passions. These passions are necessary in a being that tends constantly toward happiness. The energy of these

passions is necessary, because it depends on his temperament; a human being's temperament is necessary, because it depends on the physical elements that enter into his composition; the modifications of his temperament are necessary, because they are the infallible and inevitable consequences of the way that physical and moral beings continually act on him.

Despite these clear proofs of the lack of human freedom, some may still insist that this freedom exists. Someone will tell us that if he proposes to move or not to move his hand (actions in the category called "indifferent"),¹ he evidently appears to be master of his choice, and this proves that he is free. My reply is that this example of a person performing an action that he resolves to perform does not prove his freedom: His desire to exhibit his freedom, roused by the dispute, has become a necessary motive that decides his will for moving or not moving his hand. What misleads him, or persuades him that he is free in this case, is that he does not discern the true motive that causes him to act—namely, the desire to convince me. If in the heat of the dispute he insists and asks, "Am I not the master of throwing myself out the window?" I will say no and tell him that, as long as he preserves his reason, there is no probability that the desire to prove to me his freedom will become a motive sufficiently strong to cause him to sacrifice his own life. If my adversary, despite this, would throw himself out the window in order to prove to me that he is free, I would not conclude that he acted freely in doing this, but that the strong force of his temperament led him to this folly. Insanity is a state that is based on the heat of the blood, not on the will. Fanatics and heroes face death as necessarily as cowards flee from it. . . .

CONCLUSION

When we say that a human being is not free, we are not comparing him to a body whose motion is caused by a simple impulse: He contains in himself causes inherent to his existence, and he is moved by an internal organ that has its own laws and is necessarily determined by ideas, by perceptions, and by sensations received from external objects. We do not know the mechanism of these sensations and perceptions or the way ideas are imprinted on our brain, because we cannot discern all these movements, or perceive the chain of operations in our soul, or perceive the motive² principle that acts in us. We therefore suppose that this motive principle is free. "Motive principle" means, literally, something that moves itself, that determines itself without a cause—or rather, a term that signifies that we do not know how or why it acts as it does. It is true that people say that the soul has an activity proper to itself, and I agree. But it is certain that this activity would never take place unless some motive or cause put it in a condition to act. At least no one will claim the soul can love or hate without having been moved, without knowing the objects, or without having some idea of the qualities of these objects. Gunpowder undoubtedly has an activity proper to

¹"indifferent": neither morally good nor morally evil. [D. C. ABEL]

²motive: causing motion. [D. C. ABEL]

itself, but this activity will never take place unless someone applies fire to it, which forces it to act.

It is the great complexity of our movements, the variety of our actions, and the multiplicity of causes that move us (whether simultaneously or successively without interruption) that persuade us that we are free. If all the movements of human beings were simple, if the causes that move us were distinct and not intermingled, and if our machine were less complicated, we would see that all our actions are necessary because we could go back at once to the cause that made us act. . . .

It is, then, because we do not go back to the causes that move us, and because we are unable to analyze and disentangle the complicated movements that occur in us, that we think we are free. It is only because of our ignorance that we have the deep, though illusory, feeling that we are free, and take this feeling as a striking proof of this supposed freedom. If only each person were willing to examine his own actions, and search out his true motives and discover how they are connected, he would remain convinced that the feeling that he has about his own freedom is a mental fabrication that experience must quickly destroy. . . .

From all that has been said in this chapter, it follows that no human being is free at any time during his existence. He is not master of his formation, for this comes from nature. He is not master of his ideas or the modifications of his brain, for these result from causes that, despite himself and without his knowledge, continually act on him. He is not master of loving or desiring what he finds lovable or desirable. He is not master of deliberating in situations in which he is uncertain of the effects that objects will produce on him. He is not master of choosing what he believes to be the most advantageous. He is not master of acting otherwise than he does at the moment when his will is determined by his choice. . . .

In both the physical world and the moral world, everything that happens is a necessary consequence of causes, visible or concealed, that are forced to act according to their proper natures. In a human being, [what we call] freedom is simply necessity contained inside himself.