

inexplicable that there should be 'something' instead of 'nothing'? Are our theoretical worries about the origins of reality dispelled by the idea of God? Is the universe similar to the clock that requires a clockmaker? Does the Big Bang theory, and the other answers given by astrophysicists, solve the problem of the origins of the universe? If the universe is one big Thing, why can't it be like the rest of the things we know?

6

FREEDOM IN ACTION

Man *inhabits* the world. To 'inhabit' is not the same thing as being included in the catalogue of beings that are in the world, it is not simply being 'in' the world as a pair of shoes inside their box; it is not even the same as possessing a distinct biological world, as in the case of bats or any other animal. For us humans the world is not simply the framework of all causes and effects but the arena full of meanings within which we *act*.

To 'inhabit' the world is not only to be in the world, or to move around in the world, or to react to the world's stimuli. A bat or any other animal *responds* to its world in accordance with its own genetic programme, which corresponds to the evolutionary needs of its species. We humans not only respond to the world we inhabit, we transform it and invent it in ways that are not determined by any genetic factors – that is why the actions of Australian aborigines differ from those of the Aztecs or the Vikings. Our species is not 'enclosed' by biological determinism, but remains 'open' and ceaselessly creates itself, as Pico della Mirandola asserted. When I speak of 'creating itself' I am of course not using the term in the sense of 'making something out of nothing', like a magician that will pull a rabbit out of an apparently empty hat – I say 'apparently' because this is of course a conjuring trick, a deception. I am referring to 'acting' within the world, and from the starting point of the things that are in the world, while to a certain extent changing the world.

The important question now is to determine what constitutes an action and what acting means. It most certainly is not the same as a physical movement: 'to walk' is not the same as 'to go for a walk'. Thus the vital questions we must now try to answer are: What does

'to act' mean? What is a human action and how does it differ from other movements executed by other beings, as well as from other gestures that we humans also make? Is it not perhaps an illusion, or a prejudice, to imagine that we are capable of true actions that are not just reactions to our environment, to what influences and determines what we are?

Let us suppose that I have boarded a train and have paid for my ticket. During the journey I am thinking of other things and do not realize that I am playing with the small piece of cardboard, rolling it up and unrolling it, until I finally throw it out of the open window without noticing. The ticket inspector appears and demands to see my ticket. What a nuisance! A fine will probably be forthcoming. All I can do is to mutter by way of apology: 'I threw it out . . . without realizing.' The ticket inspector, who is, like me, philosophically inclined, then remarks: 'Well, if you did not realize what you were doing it can't be said that you threw it out. It's as if it had dropped out of your hand.' But I am not prepared to accept this kind of reasoning: 'I beg your pardon, to drop a ticket is one thing but to throw it out, even without noticing, is quite a different matter.' The ticket inspector seems to enjoy carrying on this discussion rather more than giving me a fine: 'Look here, "throwing out" a ticket is an action, it is different from a ticket dropping out of your hand, which is one of those things that just happen. When one does something it is because one wants to do it, don't you agree? But when things simply happen we have nothing to do with it, so if you did not want to throw out your ticket we can say that really it just dropped out of your hand.' I take issue with this mechanistic interpretation: 'Most certainly not! We could say that the ticket had dropped out of my hand if I had fallen asleep, for instance, or even if a gust of wind had blown it away. But I was wide awake, there was no wind, and what really happened was that I threw out my ticket without meaning to do it.' 'So there,' says the ticket inspector, tapping his notebook with his pencil, 'if you didn't mean to do it, how do you know that it was precisely you who threw it out? Because "to throw something out" is to do something, and one cannot do something without intending to do it.' 'Well, if you want to know, I'm telling you that I threw out the bloody ticket because I damn well wanted to! The fine materializes.'

But it is true that there is a difference between what merely happens to me (I overturn a glass on the table when reaching out for the salt cellar), what I do without realizing and without meaning to do it

(throwing the wretched ticket out of the window!), what I do without noticing but following a voluntarily adopted routine (putting my feet inside my slippers as I stumble out of bed half asleep), and what I do realizing what I am doing and wanting to do it (throwing the ticket inspector out of the window so that he can go and look for the damn ticket himself). It seems that the term 'action' corresponds only to this last possibility. There are, of course, other gestures, also difficult to classify, but they really can be called anything except 'actions': for instance, closing my eyes and lifting an arm when someone throws something at me, or trying to find something to hold on to when I trip. Really, an 'action' can only be what I would not have done if I had not wanted to do it, what I call an 'action' is a *voluntary* act. The by now defunct ticket inspector was right after all.

But how do we know whether an act is voluntary or not? Perhaps because before we execute it we examine various possibilities, and finally decide to choose one of them. Of course, to 'decide to do' something and actually 'doing' it are two different things. To 'decide' is to put an end to an intellectual deliberation about what I really want to do, but once I have decided I still have to do it. What I decide is the objective or aim of my action but, perhaps, not the action itself. For example, I decide to have a drink of water and lift my arm towards the glass. What did I really decide to do, have a drink of water, or move my arm? Did my deliberations refer to the glass or to my arm? And what is the real action, to hold the glass or to move my arm? If I reach out and spill the glass, can I say that I executed the action I intended, or only that I 'half' did so?

The term 'voluntary' is not as clear as it seems. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle imagines a ship's captain who must transport a cargo from one port to another. In the middle of the voyage a great storm arises and the captain comes to the conclusion that he can only save his ship and his crew by throwing the cargo overboard, thus re-establishing the ship's balance. Now, did he throw the cargo overboard because he wanted to? Clearly this must be the case, since he might well not have done so, and run the risk of capsizing. But it is also clear that he did not want to do it, because what he wanted was to transport his cargo to its final destination — otherwise he would have stayed happily at home and not put out to sea. So he threw the cargo overboard willingly but not wanting to do it. We cannot say that he threw the cargo overboard unwillingly, but equally we cannot say that getting rid of it was what he wanted to do. Sometimes it seems that we act willingly against our will!

Let us go back for a moment to the simple gesture we mentioned before: moving my arm. I move it voluntarily, that is, I do not wave it in my dreams nor do I lift it as a reflex action to protect my face when a stone is thrown at me. On the contrary, I could say to anybody interested in the matter, 'in five seconds I am going to lift my arm'. And five seconds later I indeed lift my arm. But what did I do in order to lift it? Well, all I had to do was to want to lift it and, as you see, I lifted it. Let us suppose that you then say to me, 'I heard you say that you were going to lift your arm, and I saw that you indeed lifted your arm, but that only shows that you can guess correctly when your arm is going to move, not that you *wanted* to move it and that it was *because you wanted to move it* that it moved.' I shall then insist that I knew very well that I *wanted* to move my arm and that is *why* it moved. But the truth is that, when I think about it, I don't know what I did in order to move my arm, I just moved it and that is all there is to it. I say that I 'wanted' to move my arm and then it moved, so that it looks as if I had done two things: one, to want to move my arm; two, move it. But what is the difference between 'wanting' to move my arm and 'moving' it? If I am not tied up or paralysed, is it conceivable that if I wanted to move my arm it would not move? Would it make sense to say, 'I really and truly want to move my arm so that I hope that in a little while my arm will indeed move'? Briefly, given that I am not prevented from moving my arm by external or physiological factors, is it not the same thing to want to move my arm and actually moving it? Do we have here two things, or only one? Wittgenstein refers to something of this sort when he asks himself, in his *Philosophical Investigations*: 'Let us not forget this: when "I raise my arm", my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?'¹ Where is my wanting-to-lift-my-arm except in that lifted arm? Is there something more?

I reconsider the matter a little more cautiously and I come to the conclusion that yes, there is something more. When I affirm that I voluntarily lift my arm because I want to lift it, what I am really saying is that I could well not have lifted my arm. I do not know how I lift my arm when I want to lift it, but what I do know is that if I had not wanted to lift it my arm would not have moved. The specialists in the links between the nervous and muscular systems can explain

how it happens that I come to lift my arm when I decide to lift it, but what really matters to me – what turns that trivial gesture into an 'action' – is that I can either lift it or not lift it. So that 'I have willingly done this or that' means: without my permission this or that would not have occurred. All the things that would not happen if I did not want them to happen constitute my actions. This possibility of doing or not doing, of saying 'yes' or 'no' to certain actions that depend on my will, is what we can call *freedom*. But by arriving at the notion of freedom we do not solve our problems, we just run into even more difficult questions.

For a start, we may entertain the suspicion that this matter of 'freedom' may be just an illusion I have about the possibilities really open to me. After all, the laws of nature tell us that everything that happens has a cause. I turn a tap and a few drops of water fall into the basin. If I had known beforehand whereabouts in the pipe those drops of water were, and had taken into account the law of gravity and the laws that determine the movement of liquids, I would surely have been able to determine which drop would come first and which fourth. The same applies to all the phenomena I observe around me, and even to most of those that happen in or to my body – breathing, circulation of the blood, tripping over a stone I did not see and so on. In each case I can refer to a previous situation that determines that what has happened had to happen inevitably. Only my ignorance of how things stand at moment A can justify that I should feel surprised by what occurs at moment B. *Determinism*, one of the oldest and most enduring philosophical doctrines, establishes that if I were to know how all the parts of the world are now arranged, and had exhaustive knowledge of the laws of physics, I would be able to describe, without making any mistakes, everything that will occur in the world within the next five minutes, or within the next hundred years. Since I too am part of the universe I must be subject to the same causal determination as its other parts. Where does that leave the 'yes or no' of freedom? Is it not the case that a free action is just one that I cannot foresee, even if I had full knowledge of the antecedent situation in the universe, that is to say, an action that would *invent* its own cause and would not depend on any previous one?

Let us leave aside for the time being the question of whether a strict 'deterministic' doctrine is really compatible with the principles of contemporary quantum physics. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle seems to imply a much less rigid view of causal determination in the physical world, or at least of the way we can study it. The Nobel

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1968, § 621, p. 161.

Prize winner Ilya Prigogine and the great mathematician René Thom engaged some years ago in a long polemic on this matter, the first advocating a *certain kind* of indeterminacy and the second a *certain kind* of determinism, more akin to the traditional concept. I am totally incompetent to intervene in this debate, but I believe that it is at least possible to affirm that neither the 'strong' determinism defined by Laplace two hundred years ago, nor the relative indeterminacy as defined in our day by Heisenberg or Prigogine, can answer the basic question of human freedom. For this question does not arise within the framework of physical causality – nobody doubts that many things that humans do have causes that can be explained by the laws of experimental sciences, such as neurophysiology; it arises in the domain of human actions as such, i.e. those actions that cannot be viewed solely *from the outside*, as a simple sequence of events, but that must also be examined *from the inside*, thus bringing into play variables as difficult to handle as 'will', 'intention', 'motive', 'foresight', etc.

Scientific indeterminacy on its own is not the equivalent of 'freedom': electrons may move in unpredictable ways but cannot be said to be 'free' in any relevant sense of the word. And vice versa, that which is physically or physiologically determined does not necessarily preclude the existence of free actions. Given that nobody questions the fact that life emerges from what is not alive, or conscience from that which lacks conscience, why should it not be possible for freedom to emerge from strictly determined matter?

Let us try to determine more exactly this notion that has become so problematic – a task which anyway must *always* be the first step in any philosophical analysis that does not seek to dazzle or surprise but to *understand*, that is to say, in any *honest* philosophical analysis. Let us begin by saying that freedom does not seem to presuppose an action without an antecedent cause, a sort of miracle that interrupts the concatenation of effects and their causes – or, as Spinoza put it, a new 'empire within the general empire' of the world – but involves a different kind of cause that must be taken into account together with other causes. To talk of freedom does not imply discarding causality but widening its scope and analysing it in greater depth. An 'action' is free because its cause is a subject capable of wanting, choosing and executing projects, i.e. of carrying out its *intentions*. In this sense, the simple action of lifting an arm, to which we referred earlier, can scarcely be regarded as an 'action', except if it is carried out within a wider intentional framework: I lift my arm to indicate that I want to say something in a meeting, push a doorbell or hail a taxi – or even

to demonstrate in a philosophical discussion that I am a free man that controls his actions! On the other hand, the wishes or projects of that individual who is capable of acting intentionally have no doubt their own causes, be they 'desires', 'motives' or 'reasons'. We shall return later to this matter. For the time being it is sufficient to establish that freedom is not a break in the causality chain but a new series of practical considerations that enriches it. To say 'I freely acted in the way I did' is not equivalent to saying 'this action has no cause', but rather to saying 'I as subject am the cause of this action'.

The term 'freedom' can be used in three different ways, often confused in debate. It is useful to distinguish them as clearly as possible:

1 Freedom as the capacity to act according to one's own desires or projects. This is the most common meaning of the word, and the most frequently used when freedom is discussed. It refers to a situation in which there are no physical, psychological or legal impediments that prevent us from acting in the way we wish to act. In this sense, a person who is not tied up, imprisoned, or in some way paralysed is free to move, to come and go; a person who is not subject to threats, tortured or drugged is free to speak or remain silent, to tell the truth or lie; a person who is not excluded or marginalized by discriminatory laws or does not suffer under extreme poverty or extreme ignorance is free to participate in public life and run for office. In my view, freedom in this sense implies not only being able to attempt something but to have some chance of achieving it. If there is no prospect of success we cannot say that there is freedom: nobody is really free in the face of *impossibility*.

2 The freedom to want what we want and not just to do, or attempt to do, what we want. This is a rather more subtle, less obvious sense of the concept of 'freedom'. Even if I am tied up or imprisoned nobody can prevent me from wanting to travel to a given place – all that others can do is prevent me from actually travelling. If I do not wish to do so, nobody can force me to hate my torturer, or believe in the dogmas he is trying to force me to accept. The spontaneity of my wishes is free, although circumstances may determine that I have no chance whatsoever of fulfilling them. The Stoics proudly insisted on this invulnerable freedom of the human will. I cannot always determine the course of events (a small pebble in my shoe may prevent me from walking) but the rightness of my intentions (or their perversity!) defies both the laws of physics and the laws of the state. Cato's is an example among thousands. This Roman Stoic supported the republicans'

revolt against Caesar and after the rebels were defeated he said, so Plutarch tells us: 'The cause of the vanquished was not to the gods' liking, but it was to Cato's liking.' The gods (or necessity, history, the inevitable) may defeat human endeavours but cannot prevent humans from embarking on *those* endeavours and not different ones.

3 The freedom to want that which we do not want, and of not wanting what in fact we want. This is no doubt the strangest sense of the term and the most difficult to explain. In order to attempt to do so let us first point out that we humans not only have desires but also have desires about our own desires; not only have certain intentions but wish we had those intentions, although in fact we do not have them. Let us suppose that I go past a house on fire and hear a child crying inside it. I do not want to go and rescue him (I am scared, it is very dangerous, that's what firemen are for . . .) but at the same time I wish I had the desire to go inside and save him, because I would like to be less afraid of danger and to live in a world where adults help children when there is a fire. I am what I want to be, but at the same time I wish to be different, desire different things, desire *better*. Anybody can flee from danger, but nobody wants to be a coward; sometimes I want to lie, sometimes it is to my advantage to lie, but I do not wish to see myself as a liar; I like to have a drink but I do not want to become an alcoholic. What I 'want to do now' is not identical to what I 'want to be'. When I am asked what I want to do I answer by mentioning my direct and immediate wishes, but when I am asked what I want to be (or how I want to be) I respond by expressing what I would want to want, what I believe would be to my advantage to want, what would enable me not only to 'want' freely but also to 'be' freely. The Latin poet Ovid voiced this contradiction thus: '*Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*' – I see what is best and approve of it, but I continue doing what is worst. That is to say, I continue wanting what I would not like to want. This kind of freedom takes us to the edge of a vertiginous series of possibilities: I might want to want what I do not want; or want to want what I do not want to want; or want to want what I want or do not in fact want to want, and so on. Where could we establish the last frontier of wanting, i.e. of my free will?

At the end of the nineteenth century the great German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer denied that freedom in this last sense could exist. He affirmed that human beings – and indeed all other beings, to a greater or lesser degree – are basically characterized by possessing

a will, by their 'wanting' – wanting to live, devour, own, etc. For Schopenhauer *we are what we want*, literally, not in the sense that our desires may have shaped us, but because they intimately constitute us. No doubt he can affirm that we possess 'freedom' in the second sense of the word. Nobody can prevent me from 'desiring' what I desire, just as nobody can prevent me from being 'what I am', since I am precisely what I want, not just the result of achieving my desires – infinite, never satisfied, according to Schopenhauer – but the sum total of all those unceasingly active desires, of my *desiring*. But on the other hand I cannot really want or cease to want what I want, that is to say, I am what I want, but inevitably I also want to be what I am, I desire the desires that make me exist. My will (that is, my 'character', the kind of individual I am, who will always accept some motives and reject others, etc.) can choose what I want to do, but I cannot choose my will itself, nor can I modify it as I might wish. I cannot *opt* for or against that which enables me to desire. In this way, according to Schopenhauer, the most radical freedom – 'I am what I want to be' – is compatible with the most strict determinism – 'I have no option but to be what I am.' We might harbour illusions about what we might like to be, until we encounter an irrefutable *proof* of what we really are and really desire. That is why, as Schopenhauer points out, we say in the Lord's Prayer 'lead us not into temptation'. Please, God, do not allow me to succumb to temptation, do not permit that I might get to know the worst of what I freely want to do, do not reveal to me what I really am! Needless to say, Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious has a lot in common with Schopenhauer's views.

In the twentieth century the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre developed a radical metaphysical theory of freedom based on this third meaning of the term. It was called 'existentialism' since, according to Sartre, the essential characteristic of man is the fact that he exists and must *invent* himself, without being predetermined by any kind of immutable essence or character. The sentence that best encapsulates Sartre's thought is one taken from Hegel – a contemporary of Schopenhauer, whom Hegel particularly hated – that states that 'man is not what he is and is what he is not'. This apparent tongue-twister can be rationally clarified: we humans are not something previously determined once and for all, something that was already 'programmed'; we are not even that 'something' each of us adopts as our real identity – our profession, our nationality, our religion etc. We are what we are not, what we are not yet, or what we long

to be. We are our capacity for permanently inventing ourselves, going beyond our own limits, disavowing what we previously were. For Sartre, man is *nothing but* his constant choosing what he wants to become and refusing what he does not want to become. Nothing determines that we should be this or that, either from the outside or from inside ourselves. Although we sometimes seek refuge in what we have chosen to be as if it were an inevitable fate – 'I am a Spanish, Christian, monogamous engineer', for example – the truth is that we are always *open* to transformation and able to choose a different path. If we do not change, this is not because we 'must' choose in the way we do and be what we are, but because we 'want' to be like this or like that, and do not wish to be anything different.

But what about those factors that shape us, like the times we live in, the social class to which we belong, or our physical and psychological characteristics? And what about the real obstacles that prevent us from attaining our aims? For Sartre, none of this prevents us from exercising our freedom: the individual is always free 'within a certain state of affairs and *vis-à-vis* this state of affairs'. It is I who chooses to accept my social position or rebels against it in order to change it; it is I who discovers my body's shortcomings or the obstacles that reality puts in my way when I attempt to achieve aims that defy it. Even those obstacles that prevent me from exercising my freedom derive from my decision to be free, and to be free in a particular way that is not imposed upon me. Stuttering was a problem for Demosthenes only because he freely chose to become an orator. Human freedom, understood in the radical sense Sartre gives to the word, is the willingness to *negate* the reality that surrounds us and to project an alternative reality, based on our freely accepted desires and passions. We may be unsuccessful in this attempt – in fact we are always unsuccessful, we always come up against reality, one way or the other, 'man is a *useless* passion' – but we cannot cease to attempt it nor can we give up on it, pleading as an excuse the invincible necessity of reality. The only choice that is not open to humans is the choice between being free and not being free: we are *condemned* to freedom (although this Sartrean formulation may sound paradoxical) for freedom is what defines us as human beings.

The idea of 'freedom' has a wide range of theoretical applications, and it is quite possible to accept one meaning of the term and reject the others. But in any case, to think of ourselves as being 'free' implies admitting that we humans *direct* our behaviour in accordance with 'intentions' that imply a concatenated series of actions. For example,

this morning I intend to catch a train. To this end I set the alarm clock the night before, I get up early, I wash, dress, take the lift down to the ground floor, look for a taxi to take me to the station, etc. Where does the import of my free action lie, in my original intention of catching a train or in each of the steps that are necessary for achieving that aim? Some philosophers, for instance Donald Davidson, maintain that the only real actions are the simplest and most primitive ones, i.e. voluntary bodily movements. These gestures can be 'narrated' in ways that fit different stories, some of which will be centred on my projects or intentions, others on narratives that follow a different logic – like those that would include the unwanted consequences of my intentional actions, for example.

I do not believe that anybody, if we except the ultra-radical Sartreans, can deny that we humans have instinctive appetites that often cause us to act in a particular way. But it also appears evident that we are not simply dragged along by our instincts but still remain 'within' ourselves, knowing that we are *agents*, and adapting instinctive satisfaction to different vital projects. Although some of our ends are inevitable and have not been chosen by us (nutrition, sex, self-preservation, etc.) we attempt to achieve them through means that are not inevitable in themselves but optative. Hence, in addition to appetites, we can point to long-term 'motives' as causes for our actions, and even to 'reasons', that is, considerations that can be shared with our fellow creatures. Let us remember what we said in chapter 2 about what is 'rational', i.e. the search for the best tools with which to tackle reality, and what is 'reasonable', i.e. the procedures that enable us to interact with other individuals whose intentions are, we suppose, as worthy of respect as ours. If we do not take into account both these types of rational motives it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, really to *understand* human actions. Instincts and other forces of nature suffice to *explain* events in which humans are the protagonists, just as they suffice to explain animal behaviour, or the growth of plants, or the fall of solid bodies towards the planet that attracts them. But the full comprehension of human activity requires, in addition, an inner perspective that involves the subject/agent and recognizes the connection between what we think and what we do, between our symbolic universe and the way we live in the physical world.

In any case, why should this matter of freedom be so *important* for us, so that we either affirm its existence with unbounded pride and enthusiasm, or deny it no less forcefully? The sceptic David Hume,

who was basically a determinist, maintained that the idea of freedom is compatible with determinism because it does not refer to physical causality but to *social* causality. We must believe in freedom to a certain extent in order to be able to attribute the events where humans have played a leading role to a responsible agent, who can be praised or censured – or punished, if necessary – for his actions. Freedom is indispensable if we are to determine responsibility, because without *responsibility* it is impossible to structure coexistence in any type of society. Therefore to be free is not just something we should be proud of, it can also cause us worry and even anxiety. To accept that we are free implies accepting responsibility for what we do, and even for what we try to do, or for the unwanted consequences of some of our actions.

To be free is not only to exclaim triumphantly 'it was me!' when prizes are being given out, but also to admit 'yes, it was me' when the culprit of some misdeed is being sought. There are always volunteers in the first case, but in the second it is usual to take refuge in the overwhelming weight of circumstances. The swindler of widows will blame his parents' neglect, or the temptations offered by the consumer society, or the bad example set in television series, for his criminal activity, whereas somebody receiving the Nobel prize will only speak of his or her efforts in the face of adversity. Nobody wants to be simply the sum total of his or her misdeeds: to whoever censures us for one of them we reply that 'we could not help it, I would like to see what you would have done in my place, I am not really like that' etc., attempting to transfer the blame to the society in which we live, or to the capitalist system, and to leave open the possibility of being impeccable, disinterested, brave, *better*. This is why freedom is not only a sort of award but also a burden, and many not very mature adults – i.e., not very autonomous, lacking self-awareness – prefer to relinquish it and transfer it to a leader who will take the decisions and bear the weight of the mistakes. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, in his book *The Fear of Freedom*,² analyses from this standpoint the massive fervour with which Nazi or Bolshevik totalitarianism was embraced by many in the past century.

The issue of 'responsibility' has a long history. In Greek tragedies, for instance, responsibility sometimes becomes the inescapable *fate* of the protagonist, as in the case of Oedipus in Sophocles' tragedies

Oedipus The King and *Oedipus at Colonus* – a fate he must endure even without knowing or wishing to execute those actions to which he was predestined, while at the same time understanding the voluntary processes that enmesh him in this fatal machinery. Our wishes drag us towards the inevitable, but then the inevitable must be accepted as the blind spot of our desires: to accept our guilt opens our eyes to what we are and thus *purifies* what we can become. The Greek dramatists did not know 'freedom' in the second and third sense of the term we described earlier, and therefore did not possess the notion of truly 'individual' responsibility, that is, a responsibility linked to the subjective *intentions* of the agent, and not to the objective fact of the action. The curse of the guilty falls on Oedipus for crimes he did not know he had committed (to kill his father, to sleep with his mother) but he must accept it as part of the fate that belongs to him – and to which he belongs. According to Sophocles, what makes us responsible human beings is not what we intend to do, nor indeed what we actually do, but our thoughtful acceptance of what we have done.

At the start of what we regard as the modern era another great dramatist, Shakespeare, took a very close look at the contradictory hidden aspects of freedom in action. His characters are frighteningly lucid and aware of the vertigo that takes possession of the individual who desires what his actions promise to bring, but trembles before the chain of guilt with which it binds him. Thus, for instance, Macbeth, when he hesitates during that dreadful night before assassinating king Duncan – a murder that will secure for him the crown he desires – and weighs up in fear the unavoidable responsibility that will fall on his shoulders:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If the assassination
Could trammel up the consequences, and catch
With his surcease success – but that this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all! – here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgement here – that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor.³

² Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, London, K. Paul, Trench & Trübner 1942.

³ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, London, Penguin Books 1978, Act I, Scene VII, p. 69.

Macbeth wishes to act, wishes to kill King Duncan, and desires the throne that this murder will bring him, but does not want to be forever *bound* to this action, to be held responsible by those that will hold him to account or draw an awesome lesson from his crime. If it was just a matter of killing Duncan and be done with it he would have no qualms; but responsibility is the necessary counterweight of freedom, its reverse; perhaps, as Hume points out, the very basis on which our claim to freedom rests. Actions must be performed freely if there is to be someone who will be held responsible for them; the agent is free to perform them but cannot *break free* of their consequences.

Sophocles and Shakespeare speak of 'guilty' responsibility, and not just for dramatic effect: the link between freedom and responsibility becomes even more evident when we desire the former and are frightened by the latter – that is to say, when we are faced by *temptation*. Nowadays there are many theories that seek to exonerate us from the irksome weight of responsibility that freedom entails: if my actions have any merit this merit is mine; my guilt can be shared out among my parents, genetics, historical factors, the prevailing economic system, indeed any circumstance that is beyond my control. We are all guilty of everything, therefore nobody is the main culprit of anything. In my lectures on ethics I often use this practical example, which I modify according to my fancy on the particular day. Let us imagine a woman whose husband has gone on a long journey. She takes advantage of his absence to meet her lover, but her suspicious husband unexpectedly announces his return and demands that she meet him at the airport. In order to get to the airport the woman must go through a wood where a murderer is hiding. She is frightened and asks her lover to come with her, but he refuses because he does not wish to confront the husband. The woman then asks the only policeman in the village for help, but he also refuses, since he must look after the other villagers. She then resorts to neighbours, all of whom refuse to accompany her, either because they can't be bothered or because they are scared. Finally she sets out alone, and the criminal murders her in the wood. The question is: who is responsible for her death? I get all sorts of answers, according to the personality of those questioned. Some blame the husband for his intolerance, some the lover for being a coward, some will say that the policeman is not very professional, others attribute responsibility to the institutions that cannot ensure our safety, others will accuse the neighbours of lack of solidarity, some will even blame the victim's guilty conscience. Very few give the obvious answer: the Culprit (with

a capital C, the person mainly responsible for this crime) is the murderer who kills her.

There can be no doubt that numerous circumstances determine the degree of responsibility of those involved in any action; many can be attenuating circumstances and sometimes even dilute guilt as such, but never to the extent of *separating* the agent from the action he or she intentionally performed. If we understand all the circumstances surrounding an action we might even forgive the person that carried it out, but we can never totally dismiss the responsibility of the free agent. Otherwise it would cease to be an action as such and would just be a fatal accident. Could it be the case that freedom is precisely the fatal accident that befalls human beings living in a society?

One of the most enigmatic but also one of the most thought-provoking references to the link between action and responsibility is to be found in *The Bhagavad Gita*, a long poem composed probably in the third century BC and included in the great Indian epic the *Mahabharata*. The hero, Arjuna, advances towards the enemy troops in his war chariot and has at the ready the arrows with which he will kill as many of them as possible. But among his adversaries he sees several of his relatives and friends – it is a fratricidal civil war – and this distresses him so much that he seriously considers abandoning the combat. Then his charioteer, who happens to be the god Krishna, reveals his identity, and points out to him where his duty lies. According to Krishna, Arjuna's scruples about killing his opponents are unfounded for 'the wise grieve not for those who live; and they grieve not for those who die'. In this world of deceitful appearances in which we find ourselves, that which is really substantive (Brahma, the Absolute that has not been created and is imperishable) cannot be destroyed by arrows, nor indeed be modified through any human action. Each person must act in accordance with what he is – in the case of Arjuna, who is a warrior, this entails fighting on the battlefield – but wisdom consists in detaching oneself from the consequences or the outcome of one's actions: 'Prepare for war with peace in thy soul. Be in peace in pleasure and pain, in gain and in loss, in victory or in the loss of a battle... Action is greater than inaction, perform therefore thy task in life.' We are all forced to act because of the circumstances that determine our life: 'For not even for a moment can a man be without action. Helplessly all are driven to action by the forces born of Nature.' The secret lies in acting as if one were not acting, in carrying out those actions we must carry out without being disturbed by desire, anger, fear or hope: 'In liberty from the bonds of

attachment, do thou therefore the work to be done: for the man whose work is pure attains indeed the Supreme.⁴

It is difficult for those of us who have a Christian mentality (though we may not be religious and may even be atheists) to understand this god who calmly recommends that we should kill as if we were doing nothing – or as if we were doing something else! The very notion that we must *resign* ourselves to action because it is in the order of nature, but that we must act in a totally 'disinterested' way, without regard for results, is the opposite of what 'project', 'intention', 'success' or 'failure' mean. But the weight of responsibility – which is not simply a western prejudice, since Arjuna feels it when he is about to massacre his relatives, just as Macbeth felt it before deciding to kill Duncan – is dispelled by a shocking reason: we must perform an avoidable action as if it were unavoidable. In the end, to act 'consciously' is simply to understand how we are all *acted upon* by circumstances and to recognize that we are part of what always is but never *does*. We can discover a certain parallel between this Oriental point of view and the thought of the Stoics or of Spinoza, but similar premisses lead to very different practical rules: in western thought the objective view of the causal network within which we act allows us to 'understand' an action better, but never allows us to 'wash our hands' of it, i.e. of its objectives and its consequences. We can thus understand better the respectful reproaches that a great admirer of Hindu wisdom, Octavio Paz, formulates against the doctrine contained in *The Bhagavad Gita* in his book *In Light of India*: 'The detachment of Arjuna is a personal act, a renunciation of himself and his appetites, an act of spiritual heroism, yet one that does not reveal a love of one's neighbour. Arjuna saves no one except himself... the least we can say is that Krishna preaches a disinterest without philanthropy.'⁵

To be free is to be answerable for our actions, and we are always answerable *vis-à-vis* others – victims, witnesses, judges. However, we all seem to seek 'something' that might make the heavy burden of freedom easier to bear. Could we not suppose that to be free is part of our nature as humans, but that within this 'necessary' freedom our actions are as innocent as the growing of plants or the movements of animals? If we are free 'by nature', is it not the case that nature itself

⁴ *The Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Juan Mascaro, London, Penguin Classics 1962, see pp. 3–19.

⁵ Octavio Paz, *In Light of India*, translated by Eliot Weinberger, London, The Harvill Press 1997, p. 184.

defines the scope of our freedom? What is the difference between the unavoidable freedom that pertains to the human condition and that which in other beings is simply unavoidable? A poem by the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska goes a little way towards answering this question:

The buzzard never says it is to blame.

The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean.

When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.

If snakes had hands, they'd claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn't understand remorse,

Lions and lice don't waver in their course.

Why should they, when they know they're right?

Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
in every other way they're light.

On this third planet of the sun
among the signs of bestiality
a clear conscience is Number One.⁶

Man appears to be the only animal capable of being dissatisfied with himself; *repentance* is always a possibility for the self-consciousness of free agents. But if we are free by nature, how can we regret what we have done with this freedom? How can that which we are by nature cause us internal conflict? We must now try to elucidate what our nature is, and what the idea of 'nature' means for us, who are animals capable of having a bad conscience.

Things to think about

What does 'to inhabit the world mean? Does it simply mean that it contains us or that we are part of it? What does 'to act' mean? Is 'doing' something the same as 'carrying out' an action? Can some actions be 'involuntary'? How do we know that we are doing something voluntarily? Are there things that we do voluntarily but without

⁶ Wisława Szymborska, *In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself*, in *View with a Grain of Sand*, translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Claire Cavanagh, London, Harcourt Brace & Co, 1995, p. 124.

wanting to do them? Is to 'decide' to do something the same as 'doing' it? Is wanting to move my arm and actually moving it one action, or two? When can it be said that I am acting freely? If I do not act freely, can it be said that I 'act'? What does determinism say? Is a certain kind of determinism compatible with a certain type of freedom? Is contemporary physics 'deterministic' in the same way as classical physics? Has the determinism of physics got something (or a lot) to do with human freedom? What are the various meanings of the term 'freedom'? Can we accept that we are free according to one of these meanings but not according to the others? How does freedom relate to the demands of life in a society? What does 'to be responsible' or to 'accept responsibility' for an action mean? Are there certain actions for which we are all responsible, or for which nobody is responsible? How do Sophocles, Shakespeare and the Bhagavad Gita understand responsibility? Could we regret what we have done if we were not free to do it or not do it? If we are by nature free, is it unnatural to have a bad conscience about what we have freely done?

7

ARTIFICIAL BY NATURE

In the fourth chapter we sketched a generic portrait of man as a 'symbolic animal', pointing out the characteristic traits that define him in relation to other living beings with which he has a certain degree of kinship. Symbols are conventional and therefore man is a 'conventional' animal, a living being capable of establishing and learning conventional meanings and reaching agreement on how to use them with other members of his species. But now we should ask ourselves if there exists a human nature; if we humans are shaped by nature and are part of it; if we are also 'natural beings' in addition to – or in spite of? – being 'conventional'; if there is contradiction or incompatibility between the two. These questions are interesting because getting to know our nature, or our relationship with nature, may give us some indication as to how to act and how to make conscious use of our freedom. After all, when we wish to show approval of a certain behaviour, or to excuse it, we often say that it is 'natural' to behave in such a way; and we also condemn some types of behaviour by saying that they are 'unnatural', or that they are contrary to nature. What do we mean when we make such comments?

There is a lot of talk nowadays about 'nature'. Ecologists warn us against certain forms of behaviour that threaten what is 'natural' by endangering 'nature': misuse of technology, industrial pollution, over-exploitation of natural resources, extermination of certain living species, genetic manipulation and so on and so forth. Some maintain that many of the ills that afflict us stem from our having abandoned what is 'natural', and advocate a return to 'nature': we should regard ourselves as part of nature and not as its tyrannical owners, we should somehow allow ourselves to be guided by nature. According to this