...you when you respond to it.

VOLITION AND THE LAW OF CAUSALITY

By Nathaniel Branden

"Free will"—in the widest meaning of the term—is the doctrine that man is capable of performing actions which are not determined by forces outside his control; that man is capable of making choices which are *first causes* within his consciousness, *i.e.*, not necessitated by antecedent factors. The nature of these choices, to what human faculty they pertain, how they operate and what are their limits—are questions on which various theories of free will differ.

As I discussed in my preceding article "The Objectivist Concept of Volition," Objectivism locates man's free will in a single action, in a single basic choice: to think or not to think. This choice—given the context of his knowledge and of the existential possibilities confronting him—controls all of man's other choices, and directs the course of his actions.

The concept of man as a being of volitional consciousness stands in sharp opposition to the view that dominates our culture in general and the "social sciences" in particular: the doctrine of psychological determinism.

Psychological determinism denies the existence of any element of freedom or volition in man's consciousness. It holds that, in relation to his actions, decisions, values and conclusions, man is ultimately and essentially *passive;* that man is merely a *reactor* to internal and external pressures; that those pressures determine the course of man's actions and the content of his convictions, just as physical forces determine the course of every particle of dust in the universe. It holds that, in any given situation or moment, only one "choice" is psychologically possible to man, the inevitable result of all the antecedent determining forces impinging on him, just as only one action is possible to the speck of dust; that man has no *actual* power of choice, no *actual* freedom or self-responsibility. Man, according to this view, has no more volition than a stone: he is merely confronted with more complex alternatives and is manipulated by more complex forces.

This is the view of man's nature that most contemporary psychologists accept. They accept it, many of them candidly admit, as "an article of faith." That is, the majority do not claim that this view has been proven, has been logically demonstrated. They profess a belief in psychological determinism because they regard it as "scientific." This is the single most prevalent and destructive myth in the field of psychology today.

In "The Contradiction of Determinism" (THE OBJECTIVIST NEWSLETTER, May 1963), I discussed why the determinist thesis is incompatible with the possibility of any knowledge whatever, and why, therefore, the thesis is inherently self-refuting and contradictory. I shall not cover the same ground here. In the present article, I shall discuss the two notions—both mistaken—which are most influential in propagating the mystique of psychological determinism. The first is the claim that psychological determinism is logically entailed by the law of causality, that volition contradicts causality. The second is the claim that, without determinism, no science of psychology would be possible, there could be no psychological laws and no way to predict human behavior.

What is involved, in the first of these claims, is a gross misapprehension of the nature of the law of causality. Let us begin, therefore, by considering the exact meaning of this law.

As Ayn Rand writes in *Atlas Shrugged:* "The law of causality is the law of identity applied to action. All actions are caused by entities. The nature of an action is caused and determined by the nature of the entity that acts; a thing cannot act in contradiction to its nature."

This is the first point that must be stressed: all actions are actions *of entities.* The notion that there can be actions without entities that act, which some philosophers have permitted themselves to advance, is a prime example of the fallacy of "the stolen concept," *i.e.*, the fallacy of ignoring, contradicting or denying the genetic roots of one's concepts. The concept of "action" logically requires and presupposes *that which* acts, and would

not be possible without it. The universe consists of entities that act, move and change—not of disembodied actions, motions and changes.

The actions possible to an entity are determined by its nature: what a thing can *do*, depends on what it *is*. It is not "chance," it is not the whim of a supernatural being, it is in the inexorable nature of the entities involved, that a seed can grow into a flower, but a stone cannot—that a bird can fly, but a building cannot—that electricity can run a motor, but tears and prayers cannot—that actions *consistent* with their natures are possible to entities, but *contradictions* are not.

Just as what a thing *can* do, depends upon what it is—so, in any specific situation, what a thing *will* do, depends upon what it is. If iron is exposed to a certain temperature, it expands; if water is exposed to the same temperature, it boils; if wood is exposed to the same temperature, it burns. The differences in their actions are caused by differences in their properties. If an automobile collides with a bicycle, it is not "chance" that the bicycle is hurled into the air, rather than the automobile; if an automobile collides with a train, it is not "chance" that the automobile is hurled into the air, rather than the train. Causality proceeds from identity.

Causality pertains to a relationship between *entities and their actions.*

The law of causality is a very wide abstraction; per se, it does not specify the *kind* of causal principles that are operative in any particular entity, and it does not imply that the *same* kind of causal principles are operative in *all* entities. Any such assumption would be gratuitous and unwarranted.

The actions of a stone, for example, are only *re*actions to other objects or forces; a stone, which moves by a mechanistic type of causation, cannot *initiate* actions. It cannot start rolling down a hillside, unless it is pushed by a man's hand or by the wind or by some other force *outside* itself. It can generate neither action nor goals. But an animal possesses the power of locomotion, it can initiate movement, *goal*-directed movement, it can start walking or running: the source of its motion is *within* itself. That the animal may start running in response to the perception of some stimulus-object is irrelevant in this context: what is relevant is that the animal has the capacity to respond in a manner impossible to a stone: by originating, within its own body, the motion of running—and moving toward a goal. Different causal principles, different principles of action, are involved in these two cases.

The nature of a *living* entity gives it the capacity for a kind of action impossible to inanimate matter: self-generated, goal-directed action (in the sense defined in "The Objectivist Concept of Volition"). Man's greatest distinction from all other living species is the capacity to originate an action of his consciousness—the capacity to originate a process of abstract thought.

Man's unique responsibility lies in the fact that this process of thought, which is man's basic means of survival, must be originated volitionally. In man, there exists the power of *choice*, choice in the primary sense,

choice as a psychologically irreducible natural fact.

This freedom of choice is not a negation of causality, but a category of it, a category that pertains to man. A process of thought is not causeless, it is caused by man. The actions possible to an entity are determined by the entity that acts—and the nature of man (and of man's mind) is such that it necessitates the choice between focusing and non-focusing, between thinking and non-thinking. Man's nature does not allow him to escape this choice, it is his alone to make: it is not made for him by the gods, the stars, the chemistry of his body, the structure of his "family constellation" or the economic organization of his society.

If one is to be bound by a genuine "empiricism"—meaning: a respect for observable facts, without arbitrary *a priori* commitments to which reality must be "adjusted"—one cannot ignore this distinctive attribute of man's nature. And if one understands the law of causality as a relationship between entities and their actions, then the problem of "reconciling" volition and causality is seen to be illusory.

But it is not thus that the law of causality is regarded today. That is the source of the confusion.

The historical turning-point came at the Renaissance. Windelband, in his *A History of Philosophy,* describes it as follows: "The *idea of cause had acquired a completely new significance* through Galileo. According to the [earlier] conception . . . causes were *substances* or things, while effects, on the other hand, were either their activities or were other substances and things which were held to come about only by such activities: this was the Platonic-Aristotelian conception . . . Galileo, on the contrary, went back to the idea of the older Greek thinkers who applied the causal relation only to the *states*—that meant now to the *motions* of substances – not to the Being of the substances themselves. Causes are motions, and effects are motions." (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958. Vol. II, p. 410.)

This was the view that dominated post-Renaissance science and philosophy: causality was seen as a relationship between *actions* and *actions*—not between entities and actions. The "model" of causality was mechanics: the essence of the causal relationship was identified with the relationship of impact and counter-impact, of action and reaction.

Long after the time when the mechanical "model" was recognized by physicists as inapplicable to many aspects of the physical world, *i.e.*, inapplicable even to many inanimate, deterministic systems within the universe, a disastrous legacy remained: the insidiously persistent notion that every action, including every action of man, is only a *re*action to some antecedent action or motion or force.

The view of causality as a relationship between motions is entirely spurious. It is worth noting that, if one accepts this view, there is no way to prove or validate the law of causality. If all that is involved is motion succeeding motion, there is no way to establish *necessary* relationships

between succeeding events: one observes that B follows A, but one has no way to establish that B is the *effect* or *consequence* of A. (This, incidentally, is one of the reasons why most philosophers, who accept this notion of causality, have been unable to answer Hume's argument that one cannot *prove* the law of causality. One can't—unless one grasps its relationship to the law of identity. But this entails rejecting the motion-to-motion view of causality.)

Furthermore, the motion-to-motion view obscures the explanatory nature of the law of causality. If one wishes to understand *why* entities act as they do, in a given context, one must seek the answer through an understanding of the properties of the entities involved. And, in fact, any explanation via references to antecedent actions always implies and presupposes this understanding. For example, if one states that the *action* of a wastebasket catching fire was *caused* by the *action* of a lighted match being thrown into it, this constitutes a satisfactory causal explanation only if one understands the *nature* of paper and of lighted matches; a description of the action sequence, in the absence of such knowledge, would explain nothing.

The premise that every action is only a reaction to an antecedent action, rules out, arbitrarily and *a priori*, the existence of self-generated, goal-directed action. The way in which this premise has impeded progress in the science of biology is outside the scope of this article. What is directly pertinent here is the disastrous consequences of this premise for psychology: it is this premise that forbids men to grasp the possibility of a volitional consciousness.

On this premise, thinking or non-thinking is merely a necessitated reaction to an antecedent necessitated reaction to an antecedent necessitated reaction, etc. Such a view makes man wholly passive. It is entirely incompatible with the fact of man as a cognitive self-regulator. But it is not the fact of cognitive self-regulation that must be questioned and rejected; it is the mistaken notion of causality.

To recognize that man is free to think or not to think is to recognize that, in a given situation, a man is able to think and he is able to refrain from thinking. This is his "free will." The choice to think and the process of focusing his mind are an indivisible action, of which man is the causal agent. To ask: "What *made* one man choose to focus and another to evade?" is to have failed to understand the meaning of choice in this primary sense. Neither motives nor desires nor context are causal imperatives with regard to this choice. They are not irrelevant to a man's thinking or evasion, but neither are they causally *decisive*. By themselves, they do not and cannot constitute a causal explanation.

The choice to focus one's mind is a primary, just as the value sought, *awareness*, is a primary. It is awareness that makes any other values possible, not any other values that antecede and make awareness possible. Awareness is the starting-point and pre-condition of goal-directed

(value-directed) human action—not just another goal or value along the way, as it were. The decision to focus one's mind (to value awareness and make it one's goal) or not to focus, is a basic choice that cannot be reduced further. In this issue, man is a *prime mover*.

As applied to physical nature, determinism may be regarded, and commonly is regarded, as synonymous with universal causality. But as applied to man, *i.e.*, in a psychological context, the term has a narrower meaning, as defined at the start of this article, which is *not* entailed by the law of causality and which is demonstrably at variance with the facts.

Now, let us consider the issue of psychological law and prediction.

Man's consciousness or mind has a specific nature; it has a specific structure, it has specific attributes, it has specific powers. Its manner of functioning exhibits specific principles or laws which it is the task of psychology to discover and identify. None of this is contradicted by the fact that the exercise of man's reason is volitional.

His mind is an organ over which man has a specific, delimited, regulatory control. Just as the driver of an automobile can steer the car in a chosen direction, but cannot alter or infringe the mechanical laws by which the car functions—so man can choose to focus, to aim his cognitive faculty in a given direction, but cannot alter or infringe the psychological laws by which his mind functions. If a man does not steer his car properly, he has no choice about the fact that he will end in a smash-up; neither has the man who does not steer his mind properly.

For example, a man is free to think or not to think, but he is not free to escape the fact that if he fails to think, if he characteristically evades facing any facts or issues which he finds unpleasant, he will set in motion a complex chain of destructive psychological consequences, one of which will be a profound loss of self-esteem. This is a matter of demonstrable psychological law.

Or again, if a man forms certain values—as a result of his thinking or non-thinking—these values will lead him to experience certain emotions in certain situations. He will not be able to command these emotions out of existence by "will." If he recognizes that a specific emotion is inappropriate, he can alter it by re-thinking the value(s) that evoked it—but he can do so only in a specific, "lawful" manner, *not* by arbitrary whim.

"Free will" does *not* mean arbitrary, omnipotent power – *unlimited* power – over the workings of one's own mind.

Thus, to the extent that one understands the principles by which man's mind operates, one can predict the psychological consequences of given ideas, values, conclusions, attitudes and psycho-epistemological policies. One can predict, for example, that a man of authentic self-esteem will find intellectual stagnation intolerable—that a man who regards sex, life and himself as evil will not be attracted to a woman of intelligence, independence and guiltless self-confidence, will not feel at ease and "at home" with her romantically—that a man whose guiding policy is "Don't antag-

onize anyone," will not be the first to stand up for and champion some radical new idea or theory.

One cannot predict with certainty that these men will not change their thinking. Therefore, one's predictions must take the form of "All other things being equal," or "Assuming no new factors enter the situation." But this is true in instances of prediction in the physical sciences also.

If one is to understand man psychologically, a cardinal requirement is that one identify the fact of volition. For this reason, a genuinely scientific psychology must repudiate the mystique of determinism and the spurious theory of causality on which it rests.

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