

II—If Man Is Free, So Is All Matter

by THEODORE DREISER

MR. BARRETT bases his conviction that man has free will and is therefore morally responsible for his actions on two facts, mainly: First of all, that man has intelligence, reason, and ideas, means by which he is able to manipulate his environment to his own advantage. Secondly, that man fulfills his own being, expresses his own nature. According to Mr. Barrett, the expression of one's own nature is freedom; man is free. Altogether, since man by the use of the above mentioned devices expresses himself and also, by using them, chooses the path of his action, he is morally responsible for the consequences of his acts, is bound to choose "good" rather than "evil," and has based a highly complex social life on the idea of moral responsibility.

Mr. Barrett admits that there are restrictions on freedom. These restrictions depend on a hazily drawn line, an implied separateness between physical and mental causes. This leads to the admission that man has many activities that are not free at all and that he is not even entirely free in any act. If we insert Mr. Barrett's definition of freedom here, that it is *an expression of the intrinsic nature of whatever being*, the above statement is equivalent to saying that man commits many acts not expressive of himself at all and that, in fact, in no act does he express his own nature completely, without restriction. Further than this, Mr. Barrett, by implication throughout, seems to be distinguishing between man and the other species on this earth, as the highly favored recipient of increasing freedom through the growth of intelligence, reason, and ideas. He seems further to be distinguishing between reason, intelligence, and ideas as something opposed to "senseless force" which operates the rest of nature.

When the suggestion was first made for this article, I had intended to base my argument on the more or less familiar mechanistic outline of the causes of human activities as being im-

bedded in the obviously physical nature of themselves and the obviously physical nature of their environment, picking my supporting facts from modern researches in psychology and biology. However, because of Mr. Barrett's insistence on the nature of freedom as *self-expression*, regardless of the kind of causes which produce the "self," I have decided to devote this remaining space to a discussion of such freedom, with the result, I hope, of proving that freedom on that basis exists everywhere or nowhere. If man is free in this sense, he shares this freedom with the most senseless forces. And, if his moral responsibility depends on the possession of freedom in this sense, then storms, hurricanes, and earthquakes are no less morally responsible. Therefore, do not think that I am evading the issue because I am neglecting to point out certain facts as to the sources of being or to discuss the matter of chance.

II

IN THE FIRST place, if freedom is self-expression, what energy or matter is there in the universe — electrical, chemical, or physical — which is not also expressing itself? An apple falls to the ground, thereby expressing itself as a material object, which intrinsically it certainly is. An element excited to a certain intensity gives off wave lengths of light expressing its special and intrinsic atomic character, peculiar to it and no other. A fish swims, lives in water, dies in air, thereby expressing itself in its fishy character. Mr. Barrett says that a man freely expresses himself if he wants to be a lawyer and is one, regardless of his other possibilities, and that a college hero's freedom is inhibited if, in spite of the numerous other ladies he might choose, the lady of his choice refuses to accompany him to some college festivity. A light ray proceeding from some distant star travels for some millions of miles in its original direction. Then it hits the mirror of some

THE FORUM

astronomer's telescope, and is deflected. How are the examples from the "senseless forces" different from the ordinary procedures of human life? Are we not always expressing ourselves, whether successful or not? Is that not also the very commonest feature of all else in nature — to express itself?

Freedom, in this sense, is nothing other than victory, triumph, survival. And freedom is inhibited by every encroachment on the "original direction," like the "encroachment" of the lens on the light ray or my arm against your fist "willed" to hit me. Is not this the familiar picture of stresses pitted against each other, of waves against the shore, the large fish against the small ones, one species against another, the planets against the sun and each other, a "battle" in which we are all helplessly taking part? We think ourselves free when we are not too much encroached on. Human freedom — how is it any different from, superior to, the freedom which is shared by every other thing?

And now for reason, intelligence, and ideas. I am perfectly willing to admit that humans have such qualities. How else this refutation of their importance? But how connected with our "freedom"? Mr. Barrett implies that these qualities help man to manipulate his environment, to determine what he is, with the end in view of helping him better to express himself successfully, in other words, to triumph over whatever seems to inhibit him. In other words, reason, intelligence, and ideas are not ends in themselves but means to that other end of self-expression. But so are the beaks of birds, the webs of spiders, the tropisms of fish and insects — all are means to the ends of successful self-expression or survival. It makes no difference in this classification of our so-called mental faculty as a means that it serves diverse ends, can manipulate, seem to serve itself. It serves the whole organism. What is expressed, whether by humans' using intelligence, etc. or by other animals' using "instincts," their beaks, claws, etc., is with due regard to the whole organism. This separation of one part of the activities from those of another part is only a seeming separation. In humans certainly and in other animals obviously, there are intrinsic inconsistencies of direction which before any exterior expression can be achieved must fight it out with each other, often to the defeat of any exterior expression at all.

What about the desire for rest and the desire for money? Suppose a man wants very much to spend his time in reading, resting, contemplating; suppose he wants also money, power, etc. Which is his true self? Which choice will be made freely? Will intelligence, reason, or the possession of ideas enable him to distinguish? Certainly not, I say. They can help him to be successful in the one end or the other but they are not the causes of the desires or the judges of them. If intelligence, etc. could make us free, then it would be creative. But it is created, as a means, not an end.

And this is the crux of the whole proposition. Nature is not consistent. Self-expression is not one-directional, and, the more complex the object in question — the more possibilities it has — the less is the direction to be determined by itself. Within us, at least, are basic divergences. And, no matter how clever, how intelligent, how reasoning we are, we cannot do more than serve — that is, react to — what is there already. The creative process works through us. All our causes are out of our hands. We did not make ourselves or anything we see. And the choices that we make involve no more freedom, whether successfully or unsuccessfully expressing ourselves, than do the activities or choices equally of other objects in nature. The very concept of freedom itself, that we can think of it at all, is based on a typical basic inconsistency and limitation of ourselves.

Obviously, man cannot hold in consciousness the causes of his actions, even the more immediate ones. It is only through afterthought, the mechanism called memory, that the complex of causes even occurs to us — and then only partially. And, the less we know of the diversity of causes involved in any single act, the freer we think we are. The very feeling we have of freedom, that comes to us, say, when we order, with plenty of money in our pockets, a particularly appealing dinner, can stay only as long as we do not inquire into its causes. A man will board a train and depart for the place of his choice. He marries the woman of his choice. He picks the friends he wants. He does, in a word, as he pleases — he thinks. He expresses himself. But let him examine closely into the reasons for any of his actions, and his illusion will vanish. He will find himself caught in all his acts, in every "thought," in every evaluation, in a tangled complex of suggestions, neces-

HAVE WE FREE WILL?

sities, and compulsions, which can be regarded as free only if they are thought of as isolated from the rest of nature and self-created — which, of course, is nonsense. Whether life defeats him at every turn or whether it seems to fall in with him, there is no freedom for him. And why not so? This is surely no galling fate, for it allows as much satisfaction as we have, minus the feeling of responsibility which the other view tries to force on us.

III

AND NOW WE come to the question of moral responsibility. Is a man morally responsible for freedom in the sense of self-expression? If so — that is, if he can be called responsible — then so can all other objects in nature which also express themselves; the lion for instance, when it expresses itself in killing the lamb, should feel guilty, for it has moral responsibility. Also the wind, when it rushes as a tornado; the rain, when it falls and feeds crops or swells rivers.

Yet it is not necessary to have moral responsibility as the basis of social organization. Look at the ants, bees, schools of fish, the temporary families of animals, herds and so on. Certainly there you have social life, carried on for the greater benefit of the individual through the group, to a very successful degree. The ants and bees in fact seem more successful than we in this respect and must therefore be of a considerably greater moral stature. The spiders do moral and immoral things (as *we* see them) but seemingly in order to preserve the spider race, and they do not seem to be aware of our standards. But why not? They are evolved, the same as we are. The same forces that environ them environ us. They hold their young up to the sun to make them grow. They display astounding skills — genius no less, as we see genius. But we say that they have no minds or that consciousness that we have; that we are superior and therefore moral and therefore responsible. But are we? Who is to say that? Mr. Barrett? Or has he heard someone else say it — has it not been historically repeated, and may he not be mechanistically repeating what he has heard? If he had never heard of our so-called *moral law*, our *responsibility*, would he be able to “think” or “speak” of those things? Actually how long do you think that morals and respon-

sibility would remain in their present reality if their administration were left to intelligence, reason, ideas — that is, if chemic responses to exterior and interior stimuli were not in us automatic, not a matter of “will” or “thought”?

Mr. Barrett admits that these human faculties can be used for evil ends as well as good. And what determines the good ends? What enforces them, even so far as they are enforced? Is it not always the threat of punishment, retribution? Do not morals even threaten the basis of freedom, self-expression, according to Mr. Barrett? As I have already pointed out it is possible, as all who have any experience of life must admit, for a person to have within himself two, three, or more compulsions to *be* (what Mr. Barrett would call *will*), each of them incompatible with the fulfillment of the others and perhaps all of them immoral in a social sense. The unfortunate victim of such desires (for even Mr. Barrett could hardly hold a human being responsible for his own generation) expresses himself — perhaps he rapes a girl, perhaps he steals some money or an idea, perhaps he loafs away his life, wasting his talents. Mr. Barrett holds up the awful picture of society divested of moral responsibility. What he is really talking about is a society divested of jails, prisons, stigmas, social distinctions, economic distinctions, insane asylums. I sadly fear that moral sense in the long run — and especially where there are questions of the common good — depends on the continuing existence of such institutions or ones like them. The feeling of guilt is only a reflection of their more concrete reality. For certainly man, even in his most unsocial acts, is expressing himself, just as much as in his most social. And therefore he must be free then, according to Mr. Barrett. And morals plus the concept of responsibility can inhibit even his freedom on which it depends. A sorry picture.

IV

JUST IN CLOSING I should like to ask this one question. The whole problem of freedom arises — why? Because in many ways we must at once admit we are slaves. Freedom is a relative state. Its realest sense — and the only practical one for us — is just what Mr. Barrett says it is — the least inhibited self-expression. And it is only the simplest logic to concede

THE FORUM

that successful self-expression is common throughout nature. In every conflict there is a victor and a vanquished, the victor free, the vanquished a slave.

If freedom is more than that in our lives, we never experience it. But behind that? It seems to me that true freedom cannot be conceived of in this way. We have never a chance to say what we will be "free" to do. We are born into this world with a heritage of physical and mental being, with internal conflicts set forth from the beginning. The world we are born into we are helpless to affect a priori. What effect we do have must be according to the bodies we are born with, as these contend with what we find here. And after all that is death. No one has successfully answered any fundamental questions as to why all this is. And we can say all we want — that we have free will, that we are responsible, that we have this marvelous mechanism of intelligence — these are just words, and we want to make them into physical effects. Well, the words themselves are physical effects, but they carry conviction and force only, in fact *are* only, as long as they stand out against a whole world of fact that we do and must ignore, because we are merely parts of an enormous and complicated mechanism or process which cannot be defined as good or evil but only in part and at times — and because, again, of unexplained internal conflicts, within ourselves and our particular limitations and ignorance.

In the last paragraph but one of his argument, Mr. Barrett offers four of what he must assume to be irrefutable illustrations of moral responsibility. And they may look irrefutable to some. There is not room here for all four, so I will take at random number two — the voter who votes for the politician whom he knows to be incompetent and dishonest, because the politician promises to have the voter's street repaved. Concerning this, he asks: *Is not the voter morally responsible?* My answer is no — not unless you define the prevailing social opinion or local law as moral; and, again, not unless you assume that the action of the person who does not obey it is based on a conscious or intelligent knowledge or grasp of this current public opinion or law or custom or taboo; and,

further, not unless you agree that he agrees that, for reason of benefits received — or to be received — from this public or its agreed-on government, he owes it to it to coincide with or at least to obey its conviction as to the fairness and worth-whileness of the services of the honest candidate as opposed to the dishonest candidate.

But who is to decide that? I, Mr. Barrett, or the voter in question? Why was his street unpaved? And why, under a thoroughly equitable social arrangement, would he feel it necessary to bribe the politician with his vote? Were the executives of his local public all *honest*? Would they have paved his street as quickly as that of another? It is so easy to speak of honest and dishonest politicians. But defining one — taking all his acts and deeds in order — is not so easy. For, speaking of an honest politician, an act of his that might look honest and be honest to one group of men would not necessarily be — let alone look — the same to another. To the poor it might seem just, to the rich, confiscation, or vice versa; to the intelligent, fair and just, to the unintelligent, class legislation as against mass need; and so on.

As you can see for yourself, no hard-and-fast proposition such as this can *intelligently* be propounded. Too many *ifs* are involved, too many mental or temperamental and social angles. Actually the voter might have been right in bribing the politician. It would depend on how necessary the paving of this street was; how long it had been delayed; what losses or deprivations or irritations, if any, it had entailed. In fact, if arrested for bribery, the voter might have been able to prove to a jury that he was justified (by injuries or ills suffered) in agreeing to vote for the crooked politician. Even Mr. Barrett might have been one on a jury to vote not guilty — not because the accused was not guilty of bribery but because to vote not guilty would be the only way Mr. Barrett would have of indicating that essentially equity was on the side of the voter and not on that of the prosecuting public which was seeking to hold him morally responsible. Selah.

As I have done in this case, so I can do in the other three.



Equal Rights for Men

by HARRY HIBSCHMAN

I'M A GALLANT rogue. For almost a century a lot of our women, most of them past the menopause, have been crying for Equal Rights for Women, and many members of my trousered sex have been deriding and belittling their demands. But not I, because to me their slogan sounds alluring. It titillates the ear, it intrigues the mind, and it captivates the heart. It makes a susceptible male revert to the inclinations of an older era and tempts him to buckle on armor and ride forth to break a lance for fair femininity. So I, for one, am in favor of giving the dear ladies what they profess to want; and that, I realize perfectly, is the meanest thing that we can do to them.

What the women seem to overlook is the fact that, as we learned in school, if a equals b , b must also equal a . According to their interpretation, equal rights mean getting without giving. They expect to obtain all the rights that men now have and at the same time to retain all the privileges that now adhere in the mere fact of being a female. They ask for identical rights with men on the ground of woman's natural equality but consider themselves entitled to retain all their special advantages on the ground of woman's natural weakness. They ask for equality, but what they really want is equality plus all their traditional feminine prerogatives.

I recently asked a woman long prominent in the movement for women's rights this question: "Since, to use the words of the National Women's Party, 'the women demand the same rights, in law and in custom, as men,' are we to understand that you favor equality so far as the accepted social customs are concerned — that, for example, you no longer expect us males to practice good manners, to step aside and let you precede us into a room or into an elevator or to stand with our hats off while we talk to you on a street corner?"

"Oh, no," she replied, "those things have

nothing to do with equal rights. In social matters women will, of course, continue to be women, and gentlemen will continue to observe the social amenities."

Now, I leave it to you — isn't that just like a woman? One moment she claims equal rights with men "in custom" and the next she naively reserves for herself all the privileges now possessed by her sex as a matter of social usage. She asserts the right to stand among men with her feet on the brass rail; but, when it comes to "buying one," she folds herself in the tattered cloak of outworn tradition or hides behind the skirts of Emily Post. Yet, obviously, until she learns to say, "The next round's on me," her pretensions of hundred-proof equality remain a gross and ingenuous fraud.

That the women have not yet learned the beauty of the words quoted is clear, not merely from what any curious and scientifically minded male can learn in any barroom by personal observation but also from the highbrow investigations of several groups of professional pundits. Thus a learned report from dear old Yale tells us that women in general are flatly opposed to "going Dutch" with men for meals, theater tickets, and sodas — stronger beverages being, of course, unmentioned; and another issued in Washington, D. C., last summer announces that, of more than 300 women gravely interrogated on this momentous subject, only 3.5 per cent were willing to subscribe to the Dutch-treat code so far as men were concerned. If that isn't sufficient, there is the evidence of Charley, that master mixologist around the corner, who testifies on oath, "Women at the bar! Faugh! They mooch but they never buy. They're nothing but a new breed of damn bar fly."

In short, all this talk of equal rights in law and in custom, is just hooey and blather. The fair ladies simply do not mean what they say.