

On Freedom

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The question of freedom is the most interesting question we could examine, since one can say that all of morality depends on this single question. Something so interesting justifies departing from my subject a little bit in order to enter this discussion, and to put here in front of the reader's eyes the main objections that people make against freedom, so that he can judge for himself their soundness.

I know that freedom has illustrious opponents. I know that people make arguments against it that can initially be seductive; [485] but these very arguments prompt me to report and refute them.

We have obscured this matter so much that, when we want to talk about it and be understood, it is absolutely indispensable to start by defining what we understand by freedom.

I call freedom the power of thinking of one thing or of not thinking of it, of moving or not moving, in accordance with the choice of one's own mind. All the objections of those who deny freedom can be reduced to four main ones, which I will examine one by one.

Their first objection aims to invalidate the testimony of our consciousness, and of the internal feeling that we have of our freedom. They claim that we believe we have this inward feeling of freedom merely due to a lack of attention to what is happening in ourselves; and that, when we pay reflective attention to the causes of our actions, we find, on the contrary, that they are always necessarily determined.

Moreover, we cannot doubt that there are motions in our bodies that do not depend at all on our wills, such as the circulation of the blood, the beating of the heart, etc.; often also [486] anger, or some other violent passion, carries us beyond ourselves, and makes us perform actions of which our reason disapproves. According to them, these many visible chains that afflict us are proof that we are likewise bound in all other cases.

* Translated from French by Julia Jorati, with the help of Julie Roy. The page numbers in brackets refer to the following French edition of this text, on which this translation is based: "Sur la liberté," in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 14, edited by William H. Barber, 484–502. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1989.

Man, they say, is sometimes carried away with such a speed and such jolts that he feels their upheaval and violence. Sometimes he is led by a calm motion that he is not aware of, but of which he is not any more the master. He is a slave who does not always feel the weight or the disgrace of his irons, but who is not for that reason any less a slave.

This reasoning is very similar to the following: men are sometimes sick, so they are never healthy. But this opponent does not realize that, quite to the contrary, feeling one's disease and one's enslavement is proof that one was once healthy and free.

When intoxicated, when under the influence of a violent passion, when one's organs are disordered, etc. our will is no longer obeyed by our senses; and we are no more free to use our freedom in those cases, than we would be to move an arm in which we have a paralysis.

Freedom, in man, is the health of the soul. Few people [487] possess this health completely and unfailingly. Our freedom is weak and limited, like all our other faculties: we strengthen it by becoming accustomed to performing reflections and mastering our passions; and this exercise of the soul makes it a little bit more vigorous. Yet, whatever efforts we may make, we will never manage to render this reason sovereign of all our desires; and there are always involuntary motions in our soul, just as in our body: since we are never wise, nor free, nor healthy, except to a very small degree.

I know that one can, by all means, abuse one's reason in order to question the freedom of animals, and to conceive them as machines, who possess neither feelings, nor desires, nor wills, though they have all the appearances of these. I know that one can forge systems, that is to say, errors, in order to explain their nature. But ultimately, when it is necessary to examine oneself, one must admit, if one is sincere, that we have a will; and we have the power to act, to move our bodies, to apply our minds to certain thoughts, to suspend our desires, etc.

Thus, the enemies of freedom must admit that our inner feeling assures us that we are free; and I am not afraid to affirm that there is nobody who sincerely doubts his own freedom, and whose consciousness does not oppose the [488] artificial feeling by which they want to persuade themselves that they are necessitated in all of their actions. Therefore they do not contend themselves with denying this inward feeling of freedom; but they go even farther: were we to concede, they say, that you have the inner feeling that you are free, this still would not prove anything. After all, our feelings deceive us about our freedom, in the same way that our eyes deceive us about the size of the sun, when they make us judge that the disk of that star is about two feet wide, whereas in reality its diameter is to that of the earth as a hundred to one.

Here is, I believe, what we can respond to that objection. The two cases that you compare are very different. I can and must view the objects with respect to their size only as reason directs and based on the inverse square of the object's distance. Such are the mathematical laws of optics, and such is the nature of our organs, that if my sight could perceive the real size of the sun, I would not be able to see any object on the earth; and that sight, far from being useful to me, would be harmful. It is the same with respect to the sense of hearing and of smell. I do not have, and cannot have, stronger or weaker auditory and olfactory sensations (all else being equal) except in proportion to the larger or smaller proximity of the bodies that are emitting the sounds or odors. Thus, God has not deceived me by making me see that which is distant from me in a size proportional to its distance. But [489] if I believed to be free, and I were not free at all, it would be necessary that God created me purposely to deceive me; since our actions seem free to us, precisely in the same way that they would seem to us if we really were free.

Therefore, the only thing left to those who deny freedom is the mere possibility that we might be made in such a way that we are always invincibly deceived about our freedom. Yet, this possibility is based merely on an absurdity, since this perpetual illusion God would have created would entail a way of acting in the supreme Being that is unworthy of its infinite wisdom.

Let no one say that it is unworthy of a philosopher to have recourse to this God here: for once [the existence of] this God has been proven, as it invincibly is, it is certain that he is the author of my freedom if I am free; and that he is the author of my error if, having made me an entirely passive being, he has given me the irresistible feeling of a freedom that he has denied me.

This internal feeling that we possess of our freedom is so strong that making us doubt it would require no less than a demonstration proving to us that our freedom implies a contradiction. But surely there are no such demonstrations. [490]

In addition to all of these reasons that destroy the objections of the fatalists, they are constantly forced to contradict their opinions themselves through their conduct: no matter how speciously one argues against our freedom, we always conduct ourselves as if we were free—so deeply is the internal feeling of our freedom engraved in our soul; and so much influence does it have on our actions, despite our prejudices.

Driven into this corner, people who deny freedom continue by saying: The only thing of which this internal feeling, about which you make so much noise, assures us, is that the motions of our bodies and the thoughts

of our souls obey our wills. Yet, this very will is always necessarily determined by the things our understanding judges to be the best, just like a balance is always moved by the largest weight. This is how the links of our chain attach to one another.

The ideas, both of sensation and of reflection, present themselves to us, whether you want them or do not want them, since you do not form your ideas yourselves. But when two ideas present themselves to your understanding—as for example the idea of going to bed and the idea of going for a walk—it is absolutely necessary that you will one of these two things, or that you do not will [491] either one. Thus, you are not free with respect to the act of willing itself.

Moreover, it is certain that if you choose, you will surely decide in favor of your bed or in favor of the walk according to whether your understanding judges that the one or the other of these two things is useful and suitable for you. But your understanding can only judge to be good and suitable what appears to it in that way. There are always differences between things, and these differences necessarily determine your judgment; for it would be impossible for you to choose among two indiscernible things, if there were any. Therefore all of your actions are necessary, since by your own admission, you always act in conformity to your will; and as I just proved to you, (1) your will is necessarily determined by the judgment of your understanding, (2) this very judgment depends on the nature of your ideas, and finally (3) your ideas do not depend on you.

Just as this argument, in which the enemies of freedom place their main strength, has several branches, there are also several responses.

1. When they say that we are not free regarding the act of willing itself, that does nothing to our freedom, because freedom consists in acting or not acting, and not in willing and not willing. [492]
2. Our understanding, they say, cannot help but judge that to be good which appears to it in that way; the understanding determines the will, etc. This reasoning is based solely on turning our will and our understanding, without noticing, into little entities, which they imagine act on each other and then determine our actions. But this is an error which only needs to be noticed in order to be rectified; for one easily feels that willing, judging, etc. are merely different functions of our understanding. Moreover, having perceptions and judging that a thing is true and reasonable—when one sees that it is actually so—is not an action but a simple passion: for it is in fact merely feeling what we feel and seeing what we see; and there is no connection between the approval and the action, between that which is passive and that which is active.

3. They say that differences among things determine our understanding. But they do not consider that freedom of indifference, before the pronouncement of the understanding, is a genuine contradiction with respect to things that are genuinely different; for, according to that beautiful definition of freedom, idiots, imbeciles, and even animals would be more free than us; and we would be all the more so when we have fewer ideas, and when we perceive fewer differences among things; that is to say, we would be more free to [493] the extent that we are more imbecilic, which is absurd. If that is the freedom that we lack, I do not think that we have much to complain about. Thus, freedom of indifference, with respect to discernable things, is not really a kind of freedom.

With respect to the power of choosing between perfectly similar things, it is difficult to be able to say what would happen to us then, since we do not know that power. I do not even know if this power would be a perfection; but what is quite certain is that the self-moving power, the sole and true source of freedom, cannot be destroyed by the indiscernibility of two objects; for insofar as man has this self-moving power, man is free.

4. With respect to the claim that our will is always determined by what our understanding judges to be best, I respond: the will, that is, the last perception or approval of the understanding—for that is the meaning of this word in the objection in question—this will, I say, cannot have any influence over the self-moving power, in which freedom consists. Thus, the will is never the cause of our actions, even though it is their occasion; for an abstract notion cannot have any physical influence over the physical self-moving power, which man possesses; and this power is exactly the same, before and after the last judgment of the understanding.

It is true, it would be a verbal contradiction, morally speaking, [to say] that a being we presume wise did [494] something ridiculous. As a result, such a being certainly prefers that which its understanding judges to be the best. Yet, there would not be any physical contradiction in this, because one must carefully distinguish between physical necessity and moral necessity. The former is always absolute, but the latter is always contingent, and this moral necessity is entirely compatible with the most perfect natural and physical freedom.

The physical power of acting is thus what makes man a free being, regardless of the use that he makes of it. The privation of that power alone would suffice to turn man into a purely passive being, despite his intelligence; for a stone that I throw would no less be a passive being if it

internally felt the movement that I have given to and impressed on it. Finally, being determined by what appears best to us is a perfection as large as the power of doing that which we have so judged.

We have the faculty of suspending our desires and of examining that which seems best to us, so as to be able to choose it: this is one aspect of our freedom. The power to then act in accordance with this choice makes this freedom full and whole. When we misuse this power to suspend our desires and determine ourselves too quickly, that is when so many mistakes are made.

The more our determinations are founded on good reasons, the more we approach perfection. And it is this perfection, [495] in the highest degree, which characterizes the freedom of beings that are more perfect than us, and that of God himself.

After all, if we think about it carefully, God can only be free in this way. The moral necessity of always doing the best is even greater in God, because his infinitely perfect existence is above ours. Hence, the true and the only freedom is the power of doing that which one has chosen to do; and all the objections that have been raised against this type of freedom destroy equally that of God and that of man. As a result, if it were to follow that man is not free, because his will is always determined by the things that his understanding judges to be best, it would also follow that God is not free, and that everything in the universe would be effect without cause, which is absurd.

The people, if there are any, who dare doubt the freedom of God, rely on these arguments: because God is infinitely wise, he is forced by a necessity of nature to always will the best; thus, all of his actions are necessary. There are three responses to this argument. (1) We should start by establishing what is best in relation to God, and antecedently to his will; this would perhaps not be easy.

This argument thus comes down to saying that God is necessitated to do what seems best to him, that is, to do what he wills. Yet, I ask, is there another type of freedom? Is doing what [496] we want and what we judge to be most advantageous—what in the end pleases us—not exactly the same as being free? (2) The necessity of always doing the best is merely a moral necessity: but a moral necessity is not an absolute necessity. (3) Finally—even though it is impossible for God, as a moral impossibility, to go against his moral attributes—the necessity of always doing the best, which is a necessary consequence of it, destroys his freedom no more than the necessity of being omnipresent, eternal, vast, etc.

Thus, due to his intelligence, man is under the necessity of willing that which his judgment presents to him as best. If it were otherwise, he would

have to be subject to a determination by something outside of himself, and he would no longer be free; for to will that which does not please is a genuine contradiction; and being free means doing what one judges to be best, what brings pleasure. We can hardly conceive of a being that has more freedom than the capacity of doing what pleases him. And as long as man possesses this freedom, he is as free as it is possible for freedom to make him, to borrow words from Mr. Locke. In the end, the Achilles of the enemies of freedom is this argument: God is omniscient; the present, future, and past are equally present to his eyes; but, if God knows everything that [497] I must do, it is absolutely necessary that I determine myself to act in the way that God has foreseen. Thus, our actions are not free. For if some future things were contingent or uncertain, if they depended on the freedom of man—in short, if they could happen or not happen—God would not be able to foresee them. Thus, he would not be omniscient.

There are many responses to this argument which initially appears invincible. (1) God's foreknowledge does not have any influence on the way in which things exist. This foreknowledge does not give things more certainty than they would have if God did not foreknow them. And if we do not find other reasons, the mere consideration of the certainty of divine foreknowledge is not able to destroy this freedom. After all, God's foreknowledge is not the cause of the existence of things but is itself based on their existence. Everything that exists today cannot fail to exist while it exists; and it was as certainly true yesterday and from all eternity that the things that exist today had to exist, as it is now certain that these things exist.

(2) The simple foreknowledge of an action, before it is performed, is no different from the knowledge of the action that one has after it is [498] performed. Thus, foreknowledge does not change the certainty of the event. After all, supposing for a moment that man is free and that his actions cannot be foreseen, will there not be, in spite of this, the same certainty of the event in the nature of things? And despite this freedom, was there not yesterday and from all eternity an equally great certainty that I would perform such an action today as there is presently as I perform this action? Thus, whatever difficulty there is in conceiving the way in which God's foreknowledge is compatible with our freedom, since this foreknowledge merely contains a certainty of the event—which would always be present in things, even if they were not foreknown—it is obvious that this foreknowledge does not contain any necessity, and that it does not destroy the possibility of freedom.

The foreknowledge of God is precisely the same as his knowledge. Thus, just as his knowledge does not in any way influence the things that currently

exist, so does his foreknowledge not have any influence on the things that are to come; and if freedom is otherwise possible, God's power of making infallible judgments about free events cannot make them become necessary, since for that it would need to be the case that an action can be free and necessary at the same time.

(3) In truth, it is not possible for us to conceive how God can foreknow future things, unless we suppose a [499] chain of necessary causes: for to say with the Scholastics that everything is present to God, not, to be sure, in its proper measure, but in another measure, *non in mensura propria, sed in mensura aliena*, would be to mix humor with the most important question that men can raise. It would be much better to confess that the problems that we have reconciling God's foreknowledge with our freedom come from our ignorance of God's attributes, and not from the absolute impossibility that exists between God's foreknowledge and our freedom. After all, the compatibility of foreknowledge with our freedom is no more incomprehensible for us than God's omnipresence, the infinite duration of God that has already passed, his infinite duration that is still to come, and so many things we will always be unable to deny and know. The infinite attributes of the supreme Being are chasms where our weak lights vanish. We do not know and we cannot know what relation there is between the foreknowledge of the Creator and the freedom of the creature; and, as the great Newton says, *Ut cæcus ideam non habet colorum, sic nos ideam non habemus modorum quibus Deus sapientissimus sensit et* [500] *intelligit omnia*; which means: "Just as the blind have no idea of colors, so we cannot understand how the infinitely wise Being sees and knows all things."

(4) I would furthermore ask those who, upon considering divine foreknowledge, deny the freedom of man, whether God was able to create free creatures? They have to answer that he was able to do this, since God can do anything, except for contradictions; and the attributes to which the idea of the necessary existence of absolute independence is attached are the only attributes whose communication [to creatures] implies a contradiction. But freedom is certainly not among these; for if it were, it would be impossible for us to believe that we are free, just as it is impossible for us to believe that we are infinite, all-powerful, etc. Thus one must either admit that God was able to create free things, or that he is not all-powerful, which I think nobody will say. Therefore, if God was able to create free beings, one can suppose that he has done so; and if creating free beings and foreseeing their determinations were a contradiction, why could God not, in creating free beings, ignore the use that they would make of the freedom which he has given them? This is not a way to limit divine power, only to [501] limit it to contradictions. For to create free creatures and to interfere

in any way possible with their determinations, that is a contradiction in terms; since that means creating creatures who are both free and not free at the same time. Thus it follows necessarily from the power God has of creating free beings that, if he has created such beings, his foreknowledge does not destroy their freedom, or that he does not foresee their actions. And someone who, on this supposition, denies the foreknowledge of God does no more deny God's omniscience than someone who says that God cannot do what implies a contradiction denies God's omnipotence.

But we are not forced to make this supposition; for it is not necessary for me to understand the way in which divine foreknowledge and the freedom of man are compatible, in order to grant the existence of both of them. It is enough for me to be sure that I am free, and that God foresees everything that must happen. For in this way I have to conclude that his omniscience and his foreknowledge do not undermine my freedom, even though I cannot conceive how that happens—just as, once I have proved the existence of a God, I have to admit the creation *ex nihilo*, even though it is impossible for me to conceive it.

(5) If this argument about the foreknowledge of God had any force against the freedom of man, it would likewise destroy that of God; for if God foresees everything that will happen, then it is not in his power not to do that which he has foreseen he would do. But it has been demonstrated above that God is free; freedom is hence possible. Thus, God was able to give his creatures a small portion of freedom, just as he has given them a small [502] portion of intelligence. Freedom in God is the power always to think whatever pleases him, and always to do whatever he wants. The freedom that God has given to man is the weak and limited power to perform certain motions and have certain thoughts. The freedom of children who never reflect consists only in willing and in performing certain motions. If we were always free, we would be like God. So let us be content with a share that is fitting to the position we hold in nature. But let us not renounce the faculties of a man just because we do not have the attributes of a God.