ARE HUMAN BEINGS FREE?

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the question of freedom of choice (free-will) in human beings. The process of decision making is analysed and the author presents the conclusion that since this process is determined by the perceptions and interpretations of the person, it cannot be termed free. Applications are drawn to the therapeutic process, specifically in regard to anger and guilt.

The question of human freedom has preoccupied thinkers for many centuries. Some have come to the conclusion that human beings are more or less completely determined by various factors and that their freedom is either limited or even completely absent. On the contrary, others have maintained that humans are free and that, at least in certain areas, they are not determined. The present article intends to shed some light on this matter.

Let us begin by distinguishing between the various meanings of the term freedom.

1. In a first sense, a human being will be said free when s/he can do what s/he wants. In this sense, freedom certainly exists and its existence has never been seriously challenged. Thus, everyone will agree that a person walking in the street enjoys more freedom than a prisoner locked up in a jail. It is not that the prisoner can do nothing of what s/he wants: thus, for example, even a slave chained to a wall is able to think as s/he wants. We are talking about freedom to act, which may be more or less extensive, depending on circumstances. The real problem is not in this area.

2. The real controversy begins with the second meaning of freedom. Is the will, that is the desire of humans, determined and if so, to what extent?

Let us first clarify that will and wish are two terms which designate the same thing. Language gives us an indication here, since both terms are


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often used as synonyms, in expressions such as: “I want a tomato” and “I wish I had a tomato,” or “I want you to come to me” and “I wish you would come to me.” It could be said that “wish” will be more often used when the speaker wants to communicate in a less radical manner with the listener since “I want” will often be interpreted as “I demand” and thus would seem too authoritarian.

Whichever term is used, it expresses the emotional state of the person in whose mind is contained the belief that one or another thing is good or advantageous for him or her. Let us go back to the beginning. The whole process starts with the sensory perception of something. John sees, smells, etc. a piece of chocolate. He interprets this piece of chocolate as good and advantageous for him. This interpretation determines in him the presence of a desire, a wish. Thus it is fatal, necessary and automatic that John desire the piece of chocolate if he interprets it as good for him.

Does John decide to interpret the piece of chocolate as good for him? Not at all: this interpretation “happens” to him, following from his personal context and his past experiences. But, someone might say, “John can abstain from taking the piece of chocolate, even if he wants it.” Not at all: If I observe that John does not take the piece of chocolate even if he says he wants it, I will come to the conclusion that another desire is present in him, which is also determined by another interpretation which consists for John in thinking that in the final analysis it is preferable for him not to take the piece of chocolate; while this second interpretation is present in his mind, he certainly will not take the piece of chocolate. It is not John who decides to interpret the piece of chocolate as good or bad for him. This interpretation happens to him, just as it is not I who decide to see what I see or to smell what I smell. The image of the piece of chocolate is formed on John’s retina. This image is interpreted by him to be that of a piece of chocolate and this interpretation is concomitant, more or less directly, with a value judgment (good or bad for me) formulated by John. It is accurate to say that it is John who formulates this value judgement, but he does not decide to interpret the chocolate as good or bad for him. It just happens; he finds it good or bad.

In theory, John could interpret as bad what he interprets as good, but again, if this happens, it is because John’s interpretation has changed. One could say: “John can change his interpretation of what he perceives.” Certainly, since such events do happen, this option is always available. John could work at persuading himself that chocolate is disadvantageous for him and, in that way, succeed in changing more or less permanently his interpretation of chocolate. But he could not strive