

# Ten Philosophical Mistakes

By Mortimer J. Adler

## CHAPTER 7

### Freedom of Choice

[ In these sections Adler is offering a critique of *determinism*, the idea that free will does not truly exist. Sections have been selected and slightly edited to make reading easier for a classroom of students. Comments in blue are in the original text, highlighted to help focus attention. Comments in green have been added by R.A. Baker, Ph.D. to help encourage and facilitate student discussion. ]

1.

When people think of freedom what they tend to have in mind is a freedom the existence of which cannot be and has never been denied. It is also a freedom that everyone possesses and of which no one can be completely deprived. It is the freedom we possess when we are able to do as we please or wish. We possess it to the highest degree under the most favorable circumstances: the absence of coercion, restraint, duress, and the presence of enabling means. Such obstacles as coercion and duress limit the extent to which we can do as we please; so does the lack of enabling means.

[Basically, Adler is arguing that humans indeed have the freedom to make choices.]

However, no one, not even the slave in chains or the prisoner in solitary confinement, is totally devoid of the freedom to do as he wishes. There are still some respects, however slight, in which he can do as he pleases.

[So even a prisoner in solitary confinement can make certain choices: forgiveness for those punishing them, choosing not to become bitter, deciding to make the "best" of really bad circumstances. *It is freedom in the mind.*]

....

One...acquired freedom [is] being able to will as one ought. Only through acquired moral virtue and practical wisdom does anyone come to possess such freedom. It is a freedom from the passions and the sensuous desires that lead us to do what we ought not to do, or not to do what we ought to do. When, in the conflict between reason and the passions, reason

dominates, then we are able to will as we ought in conformity to the moral law, or to normative rules of conduct.

....

...the freedom of the will in its acts of choice. Freedom of choice consists in always being able to choose otherwise, no matter what one has chosen in any particular instance. As contrasted with a freedom that consists in being able to do as one wishes, it might be described as freedom to will as one wishes.

....

2.

Prior to the end of the nineteenth century, determinists held that all the phenomena of nature are governed by causal laws – [everything operates through the laws of cause and effect]. Nothing happens by chance, in that sense of the term which regards a chance event as something uncaused. In their view, an intrinsically unpredictable free choice is exactly like a chance event and so cannot occur within the natural domain...

The causal indeterminacy involved in certain scientific formulations, especially those of quantum mechanics [I would add chaos theory], simply bears no resemblance to the causal indeterminacy involved in freedom of choice.

[This is the basic and simplistic description of *determinism*, the idea that *nothing* happens through "freedom." Everything happens through cause and effect. Adler argues that our minds...our "free will" exists outside the boundaries of the "Laws of Nature" and cause and effect.]

[Human passions] may operate according to the same principles and laws that govern all the other phenomena of the physical world, but the intellect and the will, being immaterial, do not act in accordance with these principles and laws. They are governed by laws of their own.

The acts of the intellect are either necessitated or they are arbitrary. They are necessitated when they are acts of genuine knowledge, for the intellect cannot say no to a self-evident truth, nor can it say no to any proposition that is supported by evidence and reasons that put it beyond a reasonable doubt or give it predominance over all contrary opinions...

Only when it is confronted with mere opinions, unsupported by evidence and reasons, is its judgment arbitrary.

[Does anyone disagree with this? I am not sure Adler lived in the same world that we now inhabit.]

....

What happens by chance, according to the determinists, is totally unpredictable; and since, according to them, nothing is totally unpredictable, nothing happens by chance...

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The controversy between the determinists and the exponents of freedom of choice goes beyond the denial and affirmation of that freedom. It concerns such questions as whether moral responsibility, praise and blame, the justice of rewards and punishments, depend on man's having freedom of choice.

[It appears to me that Adler is pushing the argument too far. Thoughts?]

Adler, Mortimer J., *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (London 1985), Chapter 7, Sections 1 and 2, pp.145-152)