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ARTICLE II.

THE SIMPLICITY OF WILL: ITS HARMONY WITH
FREEDOM.

BY PROFESSOR LEMUEL STOUGHTON POTWIN, D.D.

THE simplicity, or absolute oneness, of will-activity is taken for granted in the following discussion. It has been clearly stated thus: "It is important to notice the simplicity of the will as a faculty, compared with the intellect and sensibility. These latter may be divided into various subordinate faculties, or forms of action, which are consciously distinct as kinds of activity, and distinct also in their products. But the will is one simple kind of activity."¹

Now there may be agreement as to the simplicity of will without agreement as to what the will is. Professor Bain says, that "the following up of pleasure and the recoil from pain are the ultimate facts and most comprehensive types, or representations of volition."² Here is simplicity enough, but where is there any will?

Again, the following definition of will is from recent psychology: "The term will is simply a convenient appellation for the whole range of mental life viewed from the standpoint of its activity and control over movement. The *whole mind active*, this is the will. To say that there is no such thing as *the will* (a statement which troubles many right-minded persons) is simply the psychologist's perverse way of saying that mentally there is nothing but will. There is no specific mental

¹ Carroll Cutler, D.D., *The Beginnings of Ethics*, p. 176.

² *The Emotions and the Will*, 2d ed., p. 506.

element to be called will, because all states of consciousness are in their entirety the will."¹ According to this, will is the power of mental action. This is simple enough, but is it true? Is will the all-power, including perception, memory, reasoning, or is it after all *a* power?

What the human will is, ought to be discoverable in some simple way from that involuntary self-knowledge, or self-affirmation, which is rightly called consciousness. We can hear its testimony in the statement "I will do it," as applied not to some more or less distant future, but to a present object calling for immediate action. The difference between "I do" and "I will do" is clear. The latter bears the distinguishing mark of decision, direction, determination. Will, then, is the faculty that determines and directs action. Whether it takes effect in instantaneous or continuous action, whether vivid or lapsing into almost unconscious automatic activity—wherever there is decision, or direction, there is will.

We can see in the nobler of the dumb animals a participation in this power. Nor need we stop with the nobler ones. The oyster that opens its shell for food does so on purpose. The great difference between the voluntary actions of man and of the lower animals is in the contents of the "I," not in the power by which the "I" sets itself to exertion. Steam-power is one and the same, whether it lifts the lid of a tea-kettle, or propels an ocean steamship; so will-power, or decision-power, is essentially the same in every living being, high or low in intelligence, intensely self-conscious or dumbly spontaneous. Every one that moves towards an end moves by will. This wide scope of will-action harmonizes with its simplicity, and both together suggest that the difference between voluntary and spontaneous action is not essential. Voluntary action may

¹ James Rowland Angell, *Psychology* (New York, 1904), p. 379.

become spontaneous by habit, and spontaneous action may have an aim as sure and steady as voluntary action.

Now to the question of freedom. Is this will free? In other words, is the agent free in willing? More specifically, is will-activity free at its starting-point? Freedom from obstruction in carrying out one's will may seem far more important practically than this initial freedom, but non-interference after willing is a matter of occasion and circumstance, while initial freedom, if true, is invariable and essential. Now it will hardly do to say that we are *conscious* of will-freedom, for freedom is a relation,—a certain relation of active power to other things; and we cannot be conscious of a relation, or exemption. I am conscious of *self and its activities*. Will is a movement of self. Of this movement I am conscious. It is the simplest possible movement of self—a movement of determination, decision. I am not conscious of its freedom, considered as a relation to other things, but I am conscious of its being *my own*, and the *my-own-ness*—outlandish word—carries with it freedom.

Further, the formula interpretive of consciousness, "I will do it," implies conscious power to do. A man cannot will what he knows that he is unable to do. He may desire it, and do something looking towards it, but the known impossible he cannot *will*. "I cannot, but I will," is an absurdity. If, then, willing is based on conscious power, on the power of the "I," we come again to the *my-own-ness* of the act, including the will to act, and excluding all initial interference with the power of the will, which exclusion is freedom.

But are we not deceived by the subtle influence of heredity, and a mysterious evolution from the past, so that we imagine that to be our own which is, in reality, but a link in the unbroken chain of general life? The answer is, that our inherited will is a real will, the will of which we now are conscious,

and that the evolution from the past must have led up to the present will. The only will-evolution that we can trace with distinctness is from the free spontaneous to the free voluntary, or, rather, to the combined spontaneous and voluntary. Present free-will is our guarantee that freedom characterizes every stage of will-activity according to its development.

Let us note several points which this spontaneous freedom implies.

1. Deliberation is not essential to will-freedom. With, or without, deliberation there may come the decision to act; and this decision, being unforced and unhindered, is free. Deliberation,—which takes notice of the possible and the desirable,—be it long or short, difficult or easy, complex or simple, may be both preliminary to certain will-activity and consequent upon it. Deliberation may be directed by will in its main lines, and in a thousand subordinate lines, but at no point, whether it precedes or follows will-decision, is it to be identified with that decision or considered necessary to its freedom. In fact, deliberation presupposes freedom.

2. Freedom of will does not require the presence in the mind of two or more objects of choice. It is so common to think of choosing between this and that, of deciding between the *pros* and *cons*, of taking one and leaving all others, that we are in danger of identifying freedom with a comparison of objects or balancing of motives. But our formula "I will do it" marks the singleness of the object of choice or decision. In fact, there can be but one thing before the mind at the moment of decision, and the will, if free at all, is free at that moment. The mind springs effectively to the one object before it, and the alternative is not "this or that," but this or quiescence,—properly, no alternative at all. There may be an endless succession of eligible objects appearing and passing, in pairs

or singly, but their number is not in any way contributory to freedom.¹

3. The freedom of spontaneousness here advocated affords full scope to opportunity and motive. The object that awaits decision is the opportunity. The influences that develop the opportunity, and prepare the way for a decision, we call motive. It covers the wide field of sensation, intellect, emotion, conscience. Motive prepares the case,—well or ill,—and presents it. Does the will, as a faculty, receive this case, sift the evidence, formulate the conclusion, and then execute the verdict? Indeed not. The whole self, the soul, receives the case, judges it, feels it, then to the judgment and feeling adds—*or not*—one thing more, the simplicity of the enacting decision. In the "*or not*" lies the initiative freedom. This does not imply a decision *not to do*, which is as positive a volition as any. Simply the mental object passes *unwilled*; that is all.

4. The crucial test of any theory of the will is found in its view of character and moral freedom. Is man free to change his moral character? On the one hand, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin," which looks quite the other way from freedom. On the other hand, whosoever committeth sin *does so freely*; else he would not be responsible for his sin. So in regard to right-doing there is possible an urgent and

¹ Professor C. E. Strong, describing freedom of will, says: "What we are free from is the necessity of performing a certain act of which we happen to be thinking. The opposite of freedom, here, is the automatic sequence of the act upon the thought of it. . . . For freedom there must be the thought of two acts or two possibilities; freedom arises essentially in deliberation; if there be the thought of but one act or possibility, the reaction to that thought necessarily occurs automatically" (*Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, March 3, 1904). Here, it seems to me, is freedom from an imaginary necessity—"the necessity of performing a certain act of which we happen to be thinking," and because we have no other just then to think of.

even decisive good moral momentum, but the right-doer is free; else the doing is not his. All this seems paradoxical. It seems as if a man could not help doing what he does, and he certainly cannot help doing it freely. The solution of the paradox is simple, viz., No man is free from himself. Independence of self is not only an impossibility in fact, but an absurdity in conception. The simplicity of will and the essential identity of voluntary and spontaneous action point to the fact, that the self—the soul—in willing acts as a unit. The most elementary volition of a child is *its* act, and not the act of a part of it; and the volition that reaches throughout all the moral complexities of a highly developed and thoroughly furnished mind is the act of the whole soul or self. Take the question away from the abstract. Is a drunkard free to become a sober man? Yes, but he is free *as a drunkard*, for that is *what he is*. If this be determinism, then so far determinism is the truth. To explain the origin of self is no necessary part of the theory of self-freedom. It is enough for present purpose to say that the self at any moment of mature life is the result of heredity and the whole life-history, including an incalculable number of volitions in the sphere of morals, each one of which, by the law of habit, has left its mark and helped to form the moral character. Before this moral self passes constantly a succession of opportunities for action, sometimes called motives with reference to their attractiveness. But attractiveness is relative. It depends on the moral self whether this or that is morally attractive. The physical self is also powerfully represented. Now the ordinary opportunities of life are embraced, or not, *as a matter of course*, but now and then comes an extraordinary opportunity—let us say towards good—a motive that, from some *Divine* or human source, clears the intellect or kindles the heart, and lo! the matter-of-course activity gives way to an extraordinary

response of the will, that leaves its mark forever, and transforms the character. And if the transformation is not immediate and sudden, but due to a series of motives and responses, the process is the same, and as free as it is simple.

5. What becomes of the law of cause and effect in this non-alternative freedom of will? If we can be satisfied with an unsophisticated definition of cause, as that to which something owes its existence, there will be no difficulty in seeing how the law is obeyed and maintained, but of course it is in the sphere of moral causation instead of physical. Heat melts ice in accordance with physical causation. Kindness wins love in accordance with moral causation. Heat may not melt a mass of ice instantly, but the causal force, when applied, begins its work instantly. Kindness has a causal force that, when employed, begins instantly, and comes to its issue in due time in normal minds. In physical causation we suppose the effect to be irresistible because there is no free-will. In moral causation, where free-will is allowed as part of the causal force, we wait for free-will to acknowledge and yield to the causal force. Therefore moral causation is not so certain in issue as physical, but the causal force is just as real. As a physical change is impossible without a cause, so a moral change is impossible without its cause. We may be more certain that we can burst a rock than that we can persuade a man, but that does not take persuasion out of the domain of cause and effect. An act of free-will is not causeless, but only—up to the moment of decision—doubtful. And if we had "all knowledge," would it be doubtful?