

## WILL AND LIBERTY IN HUME AND BERKELEY

Marcelo Fonseca de Oliveira\*

**Abstract:** This paper aims to compare Hume and Berkeley's approach on will and liberty. Berkeley defines will as a mind's faculty, whereas Hume understands it attached to impressions. Both philosophers claim for definition as a philosophical method to enhance the knowledge of nature. The conclusion discusses determinism as attached to liberty. Since his religious commitment, Berkeley tried to turn compatible determinism and liberty. Despite the current arguments that called Hume a stringent determinist due to his aim of a Science of human nature, we state that this thesis should be revised. In other words, we can't assure definitely Hume as a determinist (Penelhum, 1993, 243), seeing that his argument covers the possibility of liberty.

**Key-words:** ethics, will, liberty.

## VONTADE E LIBERDADE EM HUME E BERKELEY

**Resumo:** O objetivo desse artigo é comparar os principais argumentos sobre a vontade e a liberdade em Hume e Berkeley. Se a vontade se constitui, em Berkeley, como uma faculdade; em Hume ela é associada às impressões. Um ponto metodológico comum em ambos filósofos é que eles compartilham da exigência de definição dos termos para bem embasar os argumentos. A conclusão deste artigo discute a noção de determinismo, que é concomitante à liberdade. Berkeley, à partir de seus compromissos religiosos, teria se esforçado em compatibilizar estas noções a princípio antagônicas. No entanto, Hume é tido pela bibliografia como um determinista, bibliografia que parece não considerar seu argumento da possibilidade da liberdade. Em outros termos, no que se configura nossa segunda conclusão, Hume não pode ser dito um determinista radical (Penelhum: 1993, 243), muito embora seu projeto de constituir uma ciência da natureza humana. Uma versão da tese compatibilista parece ter concordado com essa reivindicação.

**Palavras-chave:** ética, vontade, Liberdade

It's not without relevance that Hume's treatise advances the subject of liberty together to his reflections on Will (II.3.1.2. and 3)<sup>181</sup>. The first section of the chapter on

---

\* Mestre em Philosophie et Epistémologie (Université de Lorraine) e em Filosofia Moderna (UFMG). E-mail: marcelofonsecaoliveira@gmail.com.

<sup>181</sup> It seems that in the Treatise Hume approached the subject in a more metaphysical way than in the Inquiry. At the section VIII of the An Inquiry Concerning The Human Understanding, we can find a trying to turn compatible moral and determinism (this term was not yet used by Hume, signifying that all actions of body and mind, as natural events, has a similar causal determination). The great challenge of

this subject claim for the relationship between Will and direct passions. Hume presents us the definition of Will, namely, a consciousness' impression impelling body by motion or mind by perception. Remarkably, his argument displaces the possibility to define Will, despite giving a definition on it before. Such strategy seems close to a skeptical one, in order to avoid any philosophical debate concerning its definition.

Concerning liberty, one thing we must consider in first instance is that, since matter defines the body and the bodies are defined by matter, there is no liberty on this sphere. Necessity is the only direction that bodies obey. The issue is related also to mind, or, if its movements depend anyhow on matter and hence obeys necessity. Hume, however, was not willing to claim for any sway between mind and body.

We can't discover any substantial connection between objects (there is no knowledge of their essence). We can't say that necessity achieves the essence of objects, what eliminates the label of an extreme determinism usually said of him. In other words, if essence is unknown, there is no way how attribute principles to it. However, external objects are recognized by the observation of connections. Even that does not allow us to assert an essential connection between them, since it is our mind that makes it. Necessity is a matter of connection (union) and inference.

In searching for the true motivations of our actions, Hume present us his own thesis, by claiming a lasting connection between our actions and motivations (which includes our tempers and contexts where actions were made). Hume is clearly searching for patterns and regularities in human nature ('the necessary and uniform principles of human nature') making parallels with nature itself. Diversity is a constant effect that can be observed from descriptions of nature and men. We have a principle which links necessity to the uniformity of actions. Notwithstanding, we may question if there is really a necessity in human actions, since human beings are motivated by feelings, desires, and passions. My point here is that, giving the plurality of motivator factors, any theory which claims for patterns in human actions may be a reductionist one.

---

this section is the relationship between determinism and liberty. Will determines the choice of act or not act and this is liberty.

Actions of men must be judged by observing some principles or maxims. Regularity has distinct levels. Such degrees of regularity, related to probability and evidence, makes possible an adjustment between mind and human actions. These levels could make possible a type of harmony related to regularities and contradictions. This is complex on Hume's argumentation and deserves more attention that I could pay in the present article. What must be kept in mind, in this context, is that even in cases when we have weak connections and the irregularities of actions of mind and body are not well perceived, they still produce a certain type of regularity.

Finally, we can say that irregularities are more concerned to the limits of our reason ('confused ideas and undefined terms') than the reality of facts, on which we could still assert: despite the mind's borders, natural reality always presents us with a kind of regularity.

Necessity came so from this link between actions and motivations. It assures to the mind regularities inferred from the outside world. There is no place to liberty in this relationship. The parity between regular patterns observed from the relationship of actions, motivations, and mind's inferences assures the certainty of necessity.

The argument runs to the definition of 'moral evidence', that is, judgments and conclusions upon the relations between "[...] actions, motives, temper and situations" (HUME, 1854, p.154). The examples used by Hume are soft. They are important since they provide a full sphere of actions classified as what we know as human science (history, politics, economy and even ordinary actions, like an order gave by a nobleman to his servant). All these prove the existence of necessity in human actions though we must always pay attention to the gap between mind and nature asserted by Hume as a principle of his philosophy.

Including an explanation of physical necessity that I'll not consider here, since my issue is the connections between liberty and Will, we can depict Hume's commitment to definitions. His intellectual approach to the problem of liberty comes from the fact that definitions are the whole base of thought. Hence, if necessity assures the idea of causation, liberty assures the idea of chance that could be always refuted by the principle that experience always gives us regularities. If what exists (and could be known) is related to experience, there is no place for liberty and free-Will. The theory of

liberty is absurd because it goes against experience itself and is unintelligible since there is no definition of liberty.

The second section is intended to analyze the arguments in favor of the existence of liberty and free Will. First, individuals in their perception of their own actions, despite been conscious of their motives, could not completely admit after the execution of an action that they were motivated by necessity. This impossibility is also due to some breakthrough traits of necessity (force, violence and constraint), that blocks the recognition of necessity in the actions executed by human beings. I point out that the lack of a clear and constant consciousness of oneself during the execution of an act, leads men to consider that past actions were free. I propose to call this argument as 'the self-perception against liberty'. In this case, Hume was turned to his own theory of self and personal identity. In what extent, then, the claim that a third person (the spectator) could infer the motivations of our actions better than ourselves could be attached to Hume's theory of self? I mean, since the bundle of sensations is the only thing a person would know of himself, we could ask what type of knowledge it means. If not, a third point of view could be more able to concede a more convincing knowledge of ourselves, which seems to be paradoxical.

From this false inference of past actions derives a divergence between liberty of spontaneity and indifference. Second, then, Hume develops the argument of the falsity of the experience and sensation of liberty. Liberty is a confused connection between ideas. This bemused state of mind comes when consciousness loses the real connections between ideas which are, as we have seen, the reflection of natural connections of the external world. This topic deserves to be further explored. Men are always prone to think that Will does not has any motive which determines it. Despite the fact they can perceive that actions are motivated by Will, they cannot imagine what determines it. The explanation of this epistemic limit comes from the explanation of the illusion of the powers of Will. We even tend to think that Will, even when it is refused, is somehow presented in our thoughts, motivating our actions.

Third, men falsely believe in liberty also in a religious context. Any theory of necessity that refuses liberty is not necessarily false. Despite the use of this sort of arguments during centuries, this religious topic must not be regarded as one that

conducts us to truth. Hume is bent to prove that the theory of necessity is healthful for religion, giving us therefore a second series of definitions about necessity.

Hume states that his theory of Will is close to philosophical tradition because it doesn't deny some liberty to it, due to fact that inferences made by mind are only copies of the true connections between the observed objects in nature: "[...] but sure I am, I ascribe nothing to the actions of mind, but what must readily be allowed of. [...]" (HUME, 1854, p.160). Will, hence, is not attached necessarily to the laws of cause and effect. That must be underlined as the main point of this paper.

The principle of causality<sup>182</sup> and the observation of necessity are also included in his argument for religious reasons, such as those as 'punishment and reward'. The religious arguments about how human actions are related to God are based on this principle. This leads to reflections upon justice and agent responsibility. The theory of liberty and chance, as exposed in this second section of the Third Part of the Second Book, would have amoral consequences, since it could exempt a man from the responsibility of a given act. This, we can claim, is a strong argument to reject the theories of liberty<sup>183</sup>. Hereupon, accordingly to Hume, all actions caused by Will are, in a certain way, needed. But, by this conclusion a tenet is achieved. I mean, it does not seem logically acceptable that we can infer the non-existence of liberty by the possibility to punish someone.

Concerning Will and its motivations, Hume opposes reason and passions. Reason would never have a strict influence on passions, but it would also be inefficient in separating passions from it. Reason is associated with demonstration (abstract relations of our ideas). The hypothesis is that the efforts of reason are never enough to determine Will, since the realm of reason is related to ideas. In fact, Hume is explicit in claiming that Will is concerned to reality and, henceforth, to actions: "[...] and the Will always places us in that of realities [...]"<sup>184</sup>, (HUME, 1854, p.165).

---

<sup>182</sup> Cause gives rise to necessity by two related ways: 'constant union' of one object to another and 'inference' from the mind in observing them.

<sup>183</sup> Hume does not develop well the kinds of arguments in defense of liberty, presenting only two types.

<sup>184</sup> It is certainly not so radically that Hume provides the fork between reason and actions. In what follow of this section, he moderates this opposition in admitting that reason takes part on calculation (judgment)

The well known statement that reason always obeys passions is so important as their useful definition: "A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence of modification. [...]", (HUME, 1854, p.167). To retain Hume's definitions is a large step to comprehend his philosophy. To understand how reason should be exempt of any action or motive, an epistemic clause could be of great use. Ideas (which are representations of objects) are the basic reasons behind objects. Passions, in another view, are unique in the sense that they do not refer to any object in the world, having therefore an original existence. In other words, they do not connect to any quality from the external world, what turns them singular<sup>185</sup>.

Despite of the issues discussed above, there is not a claimed opposition between passions and reason. A fact which reinforces this view is that Hume was not a dualist. However, he also states that passions almost always follow reason. The only way to oppose reason to passions would be if they were followed by a judgement. Indeed, sometimes men take a passion for a reason. In this case, they tend to establish that a soft state of passion determines reason. Therefore, will is motivated by passions with no exceptions.

\*\*

Berkeley is historically considered an author who did not develop an ethical theory. However, this issue was approached by Olscamp (1970)<sup>186</sup>. This concept seems to arise due to certain historiographic tradition which had not underlined any moral commitment on Berkeley's works.

---

of actions from the perceptions of pleasure and pain. However, this is an indirect relation linked by the idea of cause and effect. In so doing, reason is still limited and couldn't cause actions or even volitions.

<sup>185</sup> We must compare this definition with those made by Descartes. The passions, for Descartes, are perceptions of mind (âme) caused by the movements of spirits (esprits) (Art. 27, *Les Passions De L'Âme*). There is a whole descriptive theory of kinds of movements determined by kinds of apprehensions of external objects in the world. The mind could also be responsible for produce passions by itself (thinking on the distinction between sensible and reasonable emotions).

<sup>186</sup> OLSCAMPAM (1970). This author argues exceedingly that Berkeley had, in fact, a systematic approach to ethics: "[...] Together, these facts imply not only that he had a moral philosophy, but that it may, without exaggeration, be called a system of moral philosophy." (p. 232).

I would like to briefly point out three traits that would put some light on this issue, despite been aware of the historical difficulties implicit in such endeavor. The first one concerns the fact that Berkeley had written during his youth an Opusculum entitled *Passive Obedience* (1712). Second one, B. Mandeville was a pungent interlocutor of the dialogue *Alciphron* (1732). His thought was chosen, in this dialogue, to discuss anthropological (man's place in nature) and moral (pleasure and pain) matters. Finally, Berkeley's work entitled *The Querist* (1735-37) argues that the effort is the most important treasure of men. These three works show us that moral issues were considered in each of them, in spite the fact that ethical arguments were not their main target.

Little attention was given to the fact that Berkeley had developed arguments on happiness<sup>187</sup>, liberty and free will<sup>188</sup>. As will be claimed, determinism must be rejected, accordingly to Berkeley, since free Will is what must precede the requirements for moral responsibility.

The major work to understand Berkeley's arguments on Will is his dialogue *Alciphron* (1732). There, he criticizes determinism guiding his arguments with a negative approach<sup>189</sup>. Let's look over this Dialogue to summarize arguments in defense of the freedom of Will. The major challenge would be how to conciliate the agent's freedom of choice (related to Will and actions) with the principle about God's foreknowledge (the thesis that He foresees and know all human actions).

In the discussion about the truth of Christianity, Will is argued against determinism. *Alciphron* begins the section sixteenth of chapter seven refusing religious faith and mysteries. In his rejection of religion, he also rejects human freedom and most

---

<sup>187</sup> Berkeley eudaemonistic ethics is close to some of the utilitarian solutions (he claimed, as a moral principle, to act under the commitment to assure happiness for all human beings doesn't matter where or when). Even having God as the main term of his premises (accordingly to his Ontology and Epistemology) and eternal life been the truly end of happiness (as a moral end desired by God), Berkeley somehow could be said an eudaimonistic. However, he's still far from traditional utilitarians in underlining the consequences as the effect of Will or its importance to moral judgments upon actions (see. Olscamp, 1970, p.87-91).

<sup>188</sup> Will is an active mental power responsible for agent actions. However, it should not be bemused with ideas that are, by their turn, all passives. The major work to understand his arguments on the Will is the *Philosophical Commentaries*. In this work, Berkeley also states the two major principles of his ethics, saying, God and free Will.

<sup>189</sup> *Alciphron* VII, sections 16 to 20.

of the Christian passions, since he understands that religion implies the idea of human freedom: “[...] There is therefore no foundation for praise or blame, fear or hope, reward or punishment ; nor consequently for religion, which, as I observed before, is built upon and supposeth those things.”, (BERKELEY, 1898, p. 459).

Alciphron, henceforth, represents determinism since he explains actions that are supposedly derived from free Will in such mechanical terms that Hobbes would plain agree. By considering men as a sort of puppets<sup>190</sup>, Alciphron, then, gives Euphranor a chance to argue against determinism.

In such context, the first point concerns the materiality of the soul. Thereafter, if soul and movement are two distinct things (by ontological constitutive differences, it should be said), actions are not necessary because there is not a parity (as such thing as ‘particles’) that could hold influence on each other. The issue here is clearly if actions are necessary or not, since from determinist terms we always must did what we’ve done.

Insisting on this subject, even accepting incorporeality of soul determinism would still be proved. Comprehending free will by the indifference model<sup>191</sup> enables us to show that Will is always influenced by something other than itself (there is never such a state when the both sides of an action are plentifully indifferent). In the case, Will follows judgment in all its operations.

This thesis does not need to be compatible with any materialistic claim about the soul. By offering a fine description about how men operate before actions, including the ways understanding and judgment works, Will figures in this system merely as an operative faculty that ‘obeys’ inferences made by others. For Alciphron, henceforth, Will is just like other faculties of mind (such as understanding and reason) due to the fact it is impossible for them to alter ideas coming from the external world by senses.

The Dialogue runs through the third point on why the Will is never free. The foreknowledge of God is the strongest reason generating the impossibility of freedom. Euphranor advances five points against this argument, which the two most important

---

<sup>190</sup> On the scope of modern ethics, it would be useful to compare this chapter with Leviathan’s Introduction and with article 12, from Descartes’ treatise, *Les Passions de L’Âme*.

<sup>191</sup> Where indifference is identified as power ‘to act or not to act’.



could be summarized by the statement that men must be free to incur in mistake and that God could create, without contradiction, such a free creature.

Otherwise, for Alciphron, God's foreknowledge necessarily implies determinism of actions. He represents Berkeley's voice in distinguishing between necessity and certainty<sup>192</sup>. In addition to this, what can we state about the consequences implied by the omnipotence of God? We may include the possibility of God to contradict himself and then cause a contradiction.

Finally, we are handled to the reply which underlines the superiority of judgment over Will. Judgment and Will are not really distinguished in ordinary actions. By the inertia of external objects, we must infer action's determinations from within, what constitutes the second reason to argue in favor of freedom. Reason also is determinant to agent responsibility. The very consciousness of our own actions is a trait leading to freedom, even if free will would not be a material faculty which could be experienced by senses.

Liberty is defined by Euphranor in terms of Will: "In my opinion, a man is said to be free so far forth as he can do what he Will. [...]", (BERKELEY, 1898, p. 465). In this context, Alciphron appeals to a second level argument, leading this definition to ordinary minds and stating that true philosophers must inquire whether men are 'free to Will'.

\*\*

Both thinkers were committed to definitions. Hume, however, made of this method a round-the-clock component of his thought, what seems not be the case in Berkeley. Berkeley achieves this point only after an extensive discussion upon the subject, whereas Hume departs from it.

About Will, Hume defined it softly as an impression (not being, so, a fixed faculty) that could impel body and mind through different principles. The idea of causation is always related to necessity and chance always brings together liberty.

---

<sup>192</sup> This distinction was underlined by Schlick. It's shed Berkeley into the lines of the history of ethics. See., Olscamp (1970, p.95).

For Berkeley, the Will is always reported to freedom. As we saw, it must be like that since actions and faults must both have a cause.

The first difference between them opposes a deterministic explanation of actions to a voluntarist who understands Will as the true motivator of actions. By opposing them, we could achieve other levels, including epistemic ones (on the possibility of knowledge of essences, for example). Concerning identity and self-conscious is remarkable that, for Hume, cognitive limits entails the lack of liberty; whereas for Berkeley men are full consciousness of their actions and this is a sign of liberty.

Hume is deeply far away from Berkeley by his naturalistic theory. Firstly, in making passions the explanans of actions he was searching for their psychological motivations. The existence of patterns in actions, what is due to the correspondence between natural laws, body and mind behavior, constitutes one strong reason for the nonexistence of liberty in actions. Then, we can say that Hume is determinist since he is a naturalist.

Despite having written a treatise, Hume did not let aside some dialectical sympathies, as we can draw from his argumentation on liberty. The argument of the illusion of liberty based on the conception of personal identity is completed by two appreciations on liberty: liberty from spontaneity and indifference. Hume used here what I named in Berkeley section on Will a second level argument.

Accord to Alciphron, liberty based on indifference is used to refute liberty itself, since there is never such a state which is undetermined. If Euphanor is next to Berkeley, we can claim that Alciphron, in distinct moments, argues similarly to Hume. We had illusions about Will's determination on actions since we misunderstand how Will really works (by other words, what really determines Will). This is very curious since Hume's naturalism leads him farther in terms of depth in explanation than Berkeley's idealism.

Determinism came in both theories by different needs (a naturalistic explanation about actions and a religious attachment to God's foreknowledge). Can we interpret Berkeley's arguments in favor of free-will adapted to what Hume argues about the utility of religion, in other words, religious necessity to make believe in liberty? Christianity requires liberty for ethical support, but there is no apologetically evidence

in Berkeley's Dialogue, even if his point of depart is very similar to Christian arguments. There is no commitment, in Hume, to prove the existence of the soul.

In conclusion, we must pay close attention to the fact that Hume's determinism is not classifiable as a radical one<sup>193</sup>. A gap in the inferences of mind related to external objects could justify chance, since the mind is not a perfect mirror of natural laws entailed by physical determinism. This does not mean in any way that Will does not have any connection with actions, it may as well be the contrary. Finally, in this point both neighbors would agree in a certain way, even if for Berkeley Will is related to actions by an epistemic confusion that entangles judgment on Will.

## **Bibliography:**

BERKELEY, G. Alciphron or the minute philosopher, The Works Of George Berkeley, London: George Bell and sons, 1898, Vol.II, pp.147-479

BOUVERESSE-QUILLIOT, Renée. L'Empirisme Anglais, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997

FOGELIN, Robert G. Hume's skepticism, The Cambridge Companion to Hume, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 209-238

HUME, D. Treatise of Human Nature, Philosophical Works Vol. II, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854

OLSCAMP, Paul. J. The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970, pp. 85-104

NORTON, David Fate. An Introduction to David Hume's Thought, The Cambridge Companion to Hume, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 140

- The Foundations of Morality in Hume's Treatise, The Cambridge Companion to Hume, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 270-311

---

<sup>193</sup> We should ask in what measure we can compare this position to his own mitigated skepticism.

PENELHUM, Terence. Hume's Moral Psychology, *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 238-270

TAYLOR, Jacqueline. Hume's Later Moral Philosophy, *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 311-341