

On Liberty
Chapter 5
By Madame Du Châtelet

How to cite:

Du Châtelet, Émilie: *On Liberty*. Translated by Linda Gardiner. French Text in The Saint Petersburg Manuscripts. A Critical and Historical Online Edition (2020-2023). Edited by Ruth E. Hagengruber, Andrew Brown, Ulla Kölving, Stefanie Ertz.

§. 84.

The question of liberty is the most interesting that we can investigate, since it can be said that the whole of morality depends on this one question. It is so interesting that I find it is well worth departing briefly from my subject to take up this discussion, and to lay before the reader the chief objections raised against liberty so that he can judge for himself how solid they are. I know that liberty has famous opponents, I know that arguments are made against it that may at first be attractive, but it is these very arguments that induce me to record them and refute them. This subject has been so obscured that it is absolutely indispensable to begin by defining what we mean by “liberty” when we wish to talk about it and make ourselves understood.

§. 85.

I call “liberty” the power to think of something or not to think of it, to move or not to move, in accordance with the choice made in one’s own mind.

Definition of liberty.

§. 86.

All the objections made by those who deny that liberty exists come down to four principal ones, which I am going to examine one after the other.

Their first objection seeks to undermine the testimony of our consciousness and of the inner feeling that we possess of our liberty; they claim that it is only because we do not pay enough attention to what takes place within us that we believe that we have this inner feeling and that when we pay careful attention to the causes of our actions, we find on the contrary that they are always necessarily determined.

1st objection of the determinists against liberty.

Moreover, we cannot doubt, they say, that there are movements in our bodies that do not depend at all on our will, such as the circulation of the blood, the beating of the heart, etc. Often, too, anger or some other violent passion carries us far away from ourselves and makes us commit actions that our reason disapproves of. All the visible chains that drag us down have made us believe, according to them, that we are tied down in the same way in all the rest.

Man, they say, is sometimes suddenly overwhelmed with shocks, which he feels, but is sometimes affected by gentler movements he is unaware of, which he cannot master any more than he can master the other kind. He is a slave who does not always feel the weight and the scars of his shackles, but he is still a slave.

This argument is exactly as if one said that men are sometimes ill, therefore they are never healthy. But who does not see that, on the contrary, knowing that one is ill and enslaved is proof that one was previously healthy and free?

Response.

In a state of drunkenness, or when overwhelmed by some furious passion, or when the physical organs are disturbed, our will is no longer obeyed by our senses, and then we are no more free to exercise our liberty than we would be to move an arm that had been paralyzed.

Liberty in Man is the health of the soul; few people possess this health completely and constantly. Our liberty is weak and limited like all our other faculties: we strengthen it by acquiring the habit of reflection and mastering our passions, and exercising the soul in this way makes it a little more athletic. But no matter how much effort we expend, we will never succeed in making our reason govern all our desires; there will always be involuntary movements both in our souls and our bodies, for we are neither wise nor free nor healthy except to a very small degree.

I know that we can try with all our might to misuse our reason and deny that animals possess liberty, and conceive of them as machines without sensations or desires or will, even though they have every appearance of possessing these things; I know that one can invent systems, which is to say errors, to explain their nature. But in the end when we have to interrogate ourselves, if we are in good faith we must indeed admit that we possess a will, that we have the power to act, to move our bodies, to apply our minds to certain thoughts, to put aside our desires, etc.

The enemies of liberty must therefore admit that our inner feeling assures us that we are free and I am not afraid to guarantee that there is no one who in good faith doubts his own liberty, and whose consciousness does not rise up against the artificial feeling with which they want to persuade themselves that they are determined in all their actions. Thus, it is not enough for them to deny this inner feeling of liberty, but they go even further.

Even if we agree with you, they say, that you have the inner feeling of being free, that would still prove nothing, for our feeling deceives us about our liberty, just as our eyes deceive us about the size of the sun when they make us judge that the disc of that star is about two feet across, although its diameter is really about a hundred times larger than that of the earth. Here is I think what one can reply to this objection.

2nd
objection.

The two cases you compare are very different; I neither can nor must perceive objects except in direct proportion to their size and in inverse proportion to the square of their distance, for such are the mathematical laws of optics, and the nature of my sense-organs is such that if my sense of sight allowed me to perceive the sun at its real size I would be unable to see any objects on earth; and this sense of sight, far from being useful to me, would be harmful. The same is true of the senses of hearing and smell. I do not have and cannot have these more or less powerful sensations (other things always being equal) except insofar as the bodies that produce the sounds or smells are

Response.

closer to me or further away. Thus God has not deceived me at all in making me see what is far away from me as having a size in proportion to its distance; but if I believed myself to be free, but was not, God would have created me on purpose to deceive me, for our actions seem to us to be free in precisely the same way that they would seem to be if we really were free.¹

For those who support the negative view there remains only one simple possibility, that we are created in such a way that we are always utterly deceived about our liberty; and again this possibility is only based on an absurdity, because the only result of this permanent illusion that God is supposed to have given us is conduct on the part of the supreme being that would be unworthy of his infinite wisdom.

And it cannot be said that it is unworthy of a philosopher to introduce God here, because once this God has been proved to exist it is certain that he is the cause of my liberty, if I am free, or that he is the author of my error if after creating me as a purely passive being he has endowed me with the irresistible feeling that I possess the liberty he has refused to give me.

This inner feeling we have that we are free is so strong that to make us doubt it we would need nothing less than a demonstration proving to us that being free would be a contradiction in terms; but certainly no such demonstration exists.

Added to all these arguments, which destroy the determinists' objections, who are themselves constantly compelled to refute their opinions with their own conduct, for no matter how much we propose the most specious arguments against our liberty, we will behave no matter how much, the most specious arguments against our liberty will lead us no matter how much we propose the most specious arguments against our liberty, we will always behave as if we were free, since our inner feeling of liberty is so deeply inscribed in our souls, and in spite of our prejudices, so much influence on our actions.

Compelled to abandon that argument, those who deny the existence of liberty continue by saying, The only thing that this inner feeling, which you make such a to-do about, assures you of is that the movements of your body and the thoughts in your mind obey your will, but this will itself is always necessarily determined by the things that your understanding judges to be best, just as a scale is, which always descends on the side of the heaviest weight. Here is how the links in our chain are connected:

Your ideas, whether arising from sensation or from thought, come to you whether you want them to or not, because you do not form your ideas yourself,

Now when two ideas present themselves to your understanding, such as for example the idea of going to bed and the idea of going for a walk, it is absolutely necessary that you want one of these two things or that you want neither one.

You are therefore not free even with respect to the act of willing, moreover it is certain that if you choose, you will be sure to decide in favor of either your bed or the walk

3rd
objection.

¹ The reply to this second objection is almost the same as that to the third argument against the existence of bodies. But this cannot be otherwise, since those who deny the existence of liberty raise against it part of the objections that those who deny the existence of bodies raise against their existence.

depending on whether your understanding judges which one of these two things is useful or suitable for you. Now your understanding cannot prevent itself from judging something good or suitable when it seems to it to be so. There are always differences between things, and these differences necessarily determine your judgment, for it will be impossible for you to choose between two indistinguishable things (if such things existed). Therefore all your actions are necessary, since by your own admission you always act in accordance with your will, and I have just proved to you, 1st that your will is necessarily determined by the judgment of your understanding, 2nd that this judgment depends on the nature of your ideas, and lastly 3rd that your ideas do not in any way depend on you.

Since this argument, on which the enemies of liberty put their main emphasis, has several branches, there are also several replies to it.

Firstly, when it is said that we are not free even with respect to the act of willing, this does not affect our liberty, for liberty consists in acting or not acting, not in willing or not willing.

Response.

Secondly our understanding, it is said, cannot prevent itself from judging something to be good when it seems to it to be so; the understanding determines the will, etc.

This argument is founded solely on the fact that without being aware of it they treat the understanding and the will like little physical entities, which are supposed to act on each other and then determine our actions. But this is a misconception that has only to be recognized to be corrected; for we readily see that willing, judging, etc. are simply different functions of our understanding. Moreover, having sense-perceptions, and judging that something is true and reasonable when one sees that in fact this is the case, is not being active at all, but simply passive, for it is merely to sense what we sense and see what we see. For there is no connection between accepting and acting, between what is passive and what is active.

Thirdly they say that the differences among things determine our understanding, but they fail to take into account that the freedom to be indifferent prior to the dictates of the understanding is a genuine contradiction when it comes to the things that are really different from one another, for according to this fine definition of liberty, idiots, imbeciles, and even animals would be more free than we are, and we would be more free if we had fewer ideas, if we were less aware of the differences among things, which is to say in proportion to our degree of imbecility, which is absurd.

If it is that kind of liberty that we lack, I do not see that we have much to complain about. The liberty to be indifferent about distinguishable things is thus not truly liberty. With respect to the power to choose among things that are perfectly identical, since we do not know of any such things it is hard for us to say what would happen in that case; I cannot even tell if that power would be a kind of perfection. But what is quite certain is that the power of self-movement, the sole and genuine source of liberty, could not be destroyed by the indistinguishability of two objects; so as long as Man possesses this power of self-movement, he will be free.

Fourthly with respect to the claim that our will is always determined by that which our understanding judges to be the best, I reply: The will, that is to say the final perception or authorization of the understanding (for that is the sense of the word in the objection

under discussion), the will, I say, cannot have any influence on the power of self-movement in which liberty consists, therefore the will is never the cause of our actions although it is the occasion of them, for an abstract notion can have no physical influence on the physical power of self-movement that is inherent in Man, and this power is exactly the same before and after the final judgment of the understanding.

It is true that morally speaking it would be a contradiction in terms to suppose that a wise being could do something foolish, and in consequence he will certainly prefer whatever his understanding judges to be better; but there would be no physical contradiction in this, for physical necessity and moral necessity are two things that need to be carefully distinguished: the former is absolute while the latter is never anything but contingent, and it is quite compatible with the most perfect natural and physical liberty.

This physical power to act is therefore what makes Man a free being, no matter what use he makes of this power, and being deprived of this power would alone be sufficient to turn him into a purely passive being in spite of his intelligence, for a stone I throw would still be a passive entity even if it possessed the inner feeling of the movement I apply to it.

Lastly, to be determined by that which seems best to us is at least as great a perfection as the power to do what we have judged to be so.

We have the ability to put aside our desires and to investigate what seems to us to be best in order to be able to choose it. This is one part of our liberty. The power to go on to act in accordance with our choice is what makes this liberty full and complete, and it is in making bad use of this power we have to put aside our desires by deciding too hastily that we make so many errors.

The more our decisions are based on good reasons, the closer we approach perfection, and it is this perfection in a more exalted degree that characterizes the liberty of beings more perfect than us and that of God himself.

For make no mistake, God can only be free in this way; the moral necessity to do what is best at all times is that much greater in God to the extent that his infinitely perfect being is higher than our own. The genuine and only liberty is therefore the power to do what one chooses to do, and all the objections made against this type of liberty destroy that of God just as much as they do that of Man. And in consequence if it followed that Man was not free because his will was always determined by those things his understanding judges to be best, it would also follow that God is not free and hence everything in the universe would be an effect without a cause, which is absurd. (§ 15) n.6)

Man therefore, as an intelligent being, necessarily wills what his judgment proposes to him as the best; if it were otherwise, he would have to be subject to the decisions of someone other than himself and he would no longer be free. For to will something that would not give pleasure is a genuine contradiction, and to do what one judges to be best, that which gives pleasure, is to be free, we can scarcely imagine a being who is more free than someone who is able to do what pleases him; and as long as Man has this liberty he is as free as it is possible for liberty to make him free, if I may adopt the terms used by Mr. Locke.

Lastly, the Achilles' heel of the enemies of liberty is this argument: God is omniscient; the past, the present, and the future are equally present to his view. Now if God knows everything that I must do, it is absolutely necessary that I decide to act in the way that he has foreseen, therefore our actions are not free, for if some of these things were contingent or uncertain, if they depended on Man's liberty, in a word if they could happen or not happen, God could not foresee them, and therefore he would not be omniscient.

4th
objection.

There are several replies to this argument, which at first sight seems invincible.

1. The foreknowledge of God has no influence on the manner in which things exist; this foreknowledge does not give more certainty to things than they would have if there was no foreknowledge. And if the impossibility of human liberty had not been proved by other arguments, simply taking into account the certainty of divine foreknowledge would not be able to destroy this liberty; for God's foreknowledge is not the cause of the existence of things but is itself based on their existence. Everything that exists today cannot not exist while it exists, and yesterday and for all eternity it was just as certainly true that the things that exist today had to exist, as it is certain now that these things do exist.
2. The mere foreknowledge of an action before it is performed is in no way different from the knowledge one has of it after it has been performed. Thus, foreknowledge makes no difference to the certainty that events will take place, which would be just as great even if there was no such thing as foreknowledge. Foreknowledge alone therefore has no influence on the existence of things and does not make it necessary in any way that they should take place; for 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 that some event will take place in the nature of things, and in spite of liberty, was there not yesterday and for all eternity an equally great certainty that I would perform such and such an action at present. Thus, however difficult it is to conceive of the way in which God's foreknowledge coexists with our liberty, since this foreknowledge consists only of the certainty that an event will take place, which would always be present in things even if they were not foreseen, it is obvious that it does not include any kind of necessity and that it does not destroy the possibility of liberty in any way.
3. In fact, it is impossible for us to conceive of how God can foresee future things unless we assume there is a chain of necessary causes, for to say with the Scholastics that everything is present to God, not in fact not in its own measure but in another measure in *mensura propria* but in *mensura aliena*, this would introduce comedy into the most important question that men can raise. But it is much better to admit the that the difficulties we have in reconciling God's foreknowledge and with our liberty comes come only come from the ignorance in which we find ourselves of about God's attributes, and not from the absolute incompatibility that exists between foreknowledge and that foreknowledge is incompatible with from the absolute incompatibility that there can exist there exists between foreknowledge and liberty. For the coexistence of God's

Response.

foreknowledge with our liberty God's foreknowledge For the coexistence of God's foreknowledge with our liberty is just as incomprehensible for us as his ubiquitous presence, his infinite duration in the past, his infinite duration in the future, etc. and so many other things that it will always be impossible for us either to deny or to know directly. that we can neither deny nor know directly. that it **is will** always be impossible for us either to deny or to know directly. The infinite attributes of the supreme being are abysses in which our feeble intellects perish. We do not know, and we cannot know, the relation between the creator's foreknowledge and the liberty of the beings he has created, and as the great Newton has said, *ut caecus ideam non habet colorum, sic nos ideam non habemus modorum, quibus deus sapientissimus sentit, et intelligit omnia*, which means, Just as the blind have no idea of colors, in the same way we cannot understand the manner in which the infinitely wise being sees and knows everything.

4. But I will also ask those who, taking into account divine foreknowledge, deny that Man is free, whether God could create free creatures. They will really have to reply that he could, for God can create everything except logical contradictions; the only human attributes that, if they were granted to us, would entail a contradiction are those to which the idea of necessary existence and of absolute independence is attached. Now liberty is certainly not that sort of attribute, because if that were the case it would be impossible for us to believe that we were free, just as it is impossible for us to believe ourselves to be infinite, all-powerful, etc. We must then admit that God could create free beings, or else say that he is not all-powerful, which no one, I believe, will say. Therefore, if God could create free beings, we can suppose that he did so, and if it is a contradiction to create free beings and to foresee their decisions, why in creating free beings could God not be ignorant of the use they would make of the liberty he gave them? It is not a limitation on divine power if only contradictions are excluded; but to create free creatures and then to impede their decisions in whatever way is a contradiction in terms, for it would be to create creatures who are free and not free at the same time. Thus it follows necessarily from the power that God possesses to create free beings that if he has created such beings his foreknowledge does not destroy their liberty in any way, or that although he does not foresee their actions; and someone who used this supposition to deny that God has foreknowledge would not be denying that he has all knowledge, any more than someone who said that God could not do something that entailed a contradiction would be denying his omnipotence. But we are not forced to make this supposition, for it is not necessary that I should understand the way in which foreknowledge and liberty coexist in order for me to accept both of them. It is enough that I should be assured that I am free, and that God foresees everything that must happen, for then I am compelled to conclude that his omniscience and foreknowledge do not impede my liberty in any way, although I cannot conceive how this is done, just as when I have

proved that God exists I am compelled to accept creation ex nihilo although it is impossible for me to conceive of it.

5. If this argument about God's foreknowledge had any force against the existence of Man's liberty, it would also destroy God's liberty. For if God foresees everything that will happen, then it is not in his power to refrain from doing what he has foreseen that he will do. But it has been demonstrated that God is free (§ 15.) no. 6). Liberty is therefore possible, therefore God has been able to give his creatures a small share of liberty, just as he has given them a small share of intelligence.

§. 87.

Liberty in God himself is the power to think everything that he likes at all times and to perform everything he wills at all times. The liberty that is given by God to men is the weak and limited power to perform some movements and attend to some thoughts. The liberty of children who are too young to think and that of species of animals who never think consists only of willing and performing some movements. If we were always free, we would be like God. Let us then be satisfied with a portion suitable to the rank we hold in nature; but let us not renounce the faculties of a man just because we do not possess the attributes of a God.

The difference between God's liberty and that of Man, and between Man's liberty and that of the animals.