

# CHOICE

- an essay by Eugene Halliday

**What is choice ?** What does it mean to be able to choose ?

The word implies an action, mental or physical, by which from a number of possible ideas or course of action we are able to select one rather than another and so to change our situation, or the environmental conditions under which we have to live.

The problem of choice has been a very thorny one for many centuries, because in it is involved that other difficult problem, the question of human personal responsibility. How far are human beings justly held responsible for their actions? **Responsibility** is liability to be called to account for our actions. Behind the idea of responsibility is the idea of "**ability to respond**". That is a very important idea, which we will examine rather carefully.

Many of our actions arise from some kind of stimulus received from our physical surroundings. Something happens in our environment and because of this happening we do something which, if it were not for this happening, we might not do. The question is raised: Does the **external event** compel our response, or are we **internally free** to select from an unlimited number of actions any particular one and to do this without any compulsion from the outer stimulus? Unless we have this capacity or free selection, which we call '**CHOICE**', we cannot justly be held responsible for our actions. But if we have no capacity for free selection of our actions, then in fact we are no better in this respect than a **machine**.

Now there is something about the idea that we are mere machines that most of us do not like. I say 'most of us' because there are some people who prefer to believe that we are mere machines. There could be two reasons for this: **one** that, if we are only machines, we are released from personal responsibility for our actions and so could not be justly punished for them: and **two**, that if we are only machines, then if we can gain enough knowledge about how the machine works we shall be able to predict human behaviour.

The first reason is that liked by persons who prefer to **avoid** being held responsible for their actions because being called to account for their actions which have resulted in harm to other persons, can be unpleasant and painful. Such persons, if asked why they have done a certain harmful act may reply, "I couldn't help it"; "I don't know what I was doing"; "Some thing made me do it", and so on, and so forth. By this method of explanation offering such people consider that they have released themselves from personal responsibility.

The second reason is liked by persons who would like to be able to **predict** other peoples actions. So that the prediction makers could gain some advantage. The early mechanistic behaviourists of the early twentieth century had this idea and were prepared to think that given a number of known stimuli they would be able to predict accurately the actions of behaviour of any person subjected to them. There are still people today who think that, given knowledge of the particular stimuli acting on human beings, it should be possible to predict their reactions. If this were true and the number and kind of influences on people could be controlled, their behaviour could be predicted. Actually the realities are far more complex than mechanistic theories allow and human behaviour cannot be predicted with sufficient accuracy to make it possible for the stimulus providers to make much profit from their forecasts.

Whilst our material environment might be considered simple enough for us to examine and define more or less correctly what is present in a given situation, there is another, very important factor to consider. Human beings do not have only an **EXTERNAL** environment of known or knowable physical facts. They have also an **INTERNAL** environment of psychological facts not accessible to external observation and these **internal facts have a profound influence** on human behaviour.

The ideal of materialistic experimental science is to deal only with what can be externally observed, preferably under laboratory conditions and to ignore any unobservable facts and especially those which exist or operate within the human mind and soul.

The facts that materialistic science like to deal with are called "**objective**", that is, externally observable and physically measurable. The facts that occur only inside the human mind or soul are called "**subjective**" by which is meant that they belong only to the inner psychological processes of the human being, and as such are not objectively observable from outside. There is a pretence among materialists that "objective" facts are somehow superior to those that are "subjective". The reality is that if it were not for certain "subjective" processes in these materialists themselves, processes called "curiosity", the "desire to make discoveries", the "hope" of gaining power over the things and living beings being studied and so on, there would be no "science" whatever. Science and scientists are not so objective as they would like to be thought.

The most interesting and important fact about human beings is not their physical body, though its structure and functions are very interesting at their own level, but the innermost processes of the mind, soul and spirit: for it is within the realm of these innermost processes that the real issues of life are decided.

Somewhere in the depths of the human soul there is secreted the centre of decision, the place where lives the free will of man, the holy of holies in which dwells the divine spirit. In men of courage and strong mind, not even the cleverest brain-washing techniques of modern science have been able to uproot their free-will, for such men "do not live by bread alone, but every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God".

The interesting thing about the inner psychological and spiritual processes of the human being is that they are not known to the materialistic man of science. Attempts have been made more and more of recent years to invade

man's inner world by the use of various electronic devices, the electroencephalograph and so on. But although such devices have shown that certain electronic and electro-magnetic processes occur under certain conditions in the physical human brain, there has been no method of translating such processes into the physiological factors that we internally experience as wishes, wants, desires, feelings, emotions, thoughts, decisions, etc. The machine that can tell us that there are certain kinds of brainwaves generated under certain physical conditions, cannot tell us anything whatever about the **PSYCHOLOGICAL** processes that accompany them. Many machines can register muscular and electro-magnetic tensions within us, but they cannot tell us what we are actually **thinking, feeling or willing** whilst these tensions are present. On a certain machine we may get a metre reading of say 75, but this reading does not reveal whether we are thinking of our Aunt Florence or deciding to go on a Mediterranean holiday. The human being is not what the materialistic scientists had hoped he would prove to be.

Jesus says that God is Spirit, that **Spirit "blows where it lists"**, that is, is unpredictable in its actions and that "every man born of the Spirit is like the Spirit". The unpredictability of the divine Spirit is the source of the unpredictability of the human soul.

If a thing were totally predictable it should be entirely mechanical. If a human being becomes predictable it is because he has allowed himself to **FALL INTO** a repetitive behaviour pattern. **Repetition** of behaviour is the only ground for predicting the action of anything. The earth rotates on its axis once a day. It has done so as long as man has observed it. Because of its repeated rotation we have come to believe that we can predict that there will be a "tomorrow" - "There'll always be another day", we say, and underneath our surety is only the fact of past repetitions. What keeps the earth rotating, we say, is its "mass-inertia", but we only have past statistics to support our belief in "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow."

In the human being there are cycles of events, repetitions of **processes**, such as the circulation of the blood, the movement of our lungs in breathing, the intake of food and the excreting of waste materials and so on. All of these are fairly safe to predict as long as we continue to live.

There are also cycles of **mental** events, repetitions of mental behaviours and interests. Newspapers are read daily, T. V. shows are watched, sporting events are looked forward to. Mental habits exist and where they are well established their effects can be fairly well predicted.

But there are also **inner processes in the human being which are not cyclic**, do not predictably repeat themselves. Of such processes are those that we call "**creative**", the processes that bring ever new things into being, that create great works of art, symphonies, wonderful new sound patterns, new inventions of all kinds. These creative processes which are not predictable, precisely because they are CREATIVE, bring into the world things never before seen or heard.

Somewhere hidden in the depths of man's soul is **the CENTRE OF CREATIVITY WHICH MAKES THE HUMAN BEING AN UNPREDICTABLE MYSTERY**. And here, in this centre, is man's real ability to respond adequately to whatever presents itself to him, his **RESPONSE - ABILITY**, not his **responsibility**, which is merely his liability to be called by some outer authority to account for his actions.

In man's response-ability is his **real freedom**, and his **dignity** as a human being. There is no dignity in being a mere machine, though there may be dignity in being able to invent one. To become aware of our inner response-ability is to become aware that we are true human beings, beings of free will and capacity for choice. When we realise our human freedom we are realising the divinity within us; we are attaining the dignity of our true status as spiritual beings; we are fulfilling the purpose for which God has created us .

**To be capable of free choice is to be free from predictable habit patterns**. A hunter who hunts animals captures them because they have habits which he can study. A clever salesman can show high results because he studies the physical and mental habits of his potential customers. He is a hunter of human beings, dependent for his success on human behavioural repetitiveness .

Jesus called some fishermen, who knew the habits of fish and said to them "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men". He knew what was in men, He knew their mental and physical habits. And He knew also that they pursued their goals in certain ways. And He knew also that deep in the centre of the intelligent human being is a hunger for truth. **"Know the Truth, and the Truth will make you free"**.

The human being who is at all aware of what to be really human is, is on a search for truth, for he feels that within his centre only Truth can lead him into his humanity, and only the full realisation of his humanity can resolve the hidden conflicts of his being.

Man stands between **two worlds**, the world of **free decisions**, which is the world of spirit and the world of **bound matter** and its repetitive patterns of motion. It is man's divinely appointed work to carry his decisive freedom into the realm of the material world's bondage and to free it from itself-held inertia and darkness, so that the world will once again unfold its hidden wonders and blossom forth its beauties as it did in the pre-fallen Edenic state in which humanity was created.

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