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The Free Will–Determinism Debate and Social Work

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Social workers' judgments about the determinants of clients' problems have a substantial effect on practitioners' willingness to provide assistance. There is considerable variation in professionals' beliefs about the extent to which clients are themselves responsible for their difficulties, as opposed to factors that are beyond their control. This article examines the philosophical controversy known as the free will–determinism debate, and assesses its implications for the profession of social work.

In the fall of 1982, *Time* magazine featured a cover story on the dismal status of the U.S. prison system. During the week following its appearance, two letters to the editor were published in response to the article's commentary on our nation's correctional institutions and their inmates:

To the Editors:

When considering prisons, it should be kept in mind that every inmate is there by choice. He made the decision to do time the moment he committed the crime.

To the Editors:

Our genes and our environment control our destinies. The idea of conscious choice is ridiculous. Yes, prisons should be designed to protect society, but they should not punish the poor slobs who were headed for jail from birth.¹

The juxtaposition of these letters is, of course, striking. Their authors clearly view the world through radically different lenses. The first is

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committed to the view that individuals who violate our laws and statutes do so deliberately, willingly, and rationally. In short, criminals know what they are doing, and simply take calculated risks to which are attached, at least in principle, well publicized penalties. From the point of view of the second author, those convicted of breaking the law are essentially victims of misshapen genes or toxic environmental circumstances that have led them forcibly down one of life's wayward paths.

These contrasting views concerning the determinants of human misbehavior represent one of the most enduring controversies in recorded history, commonly known as the free will–determinism debate. Put briefly, on one side are those who argue that human beings are willful actors who actively shape their own destinies and who independently make rational choices based on personal preferences and wishes. On the other side are those who claim that human behavior is largely or entirely determined by a series of antecedent events and factors, such that any given “choice” or behavior is a mere product of prior causes, be they psychological, environmental, mechanical, or physical.

Implications for Social Work

The free will–determinism debate is remarkably relevant to the practice of social work in at least two general ways. First, social workers repeatedly make assumptions about the determinants and malleability of clients' problems and shape interventions or treatment plans accordingly. Mental retardation, we may conclude, is a function of certain chromosomal abnormalities and is thus amenable to only a limited range of treatment approaches. Family discord, on the other hand, may emerge as a result, for example, of personality quirks of family members, the strain of a sudden illness, financial catastrophe, or certain learning disabilities. Poverty, we might argue, stems from individual lethargy, structural problems in our economy that lead to high rates of unemployment, or physical disabilities. How we respond to these problems—whether we focus our attention on environmental determinants, health problems, or individual character—frequently depends on assumptions that we make about the extent to which people's problems are the result of factors over which they have control.

Second, the conclusions that social workers reach about the causal determinants of clients' difficulties frequently lead to assumptions about the extent to which they deserve assistance and whatever benefits or services there are to offer. If we conclude that a client is chronically depressed because of a series of unforeseen, tragic events in her life,

we may be more inclined to offer solace and support than we would be if we decide that her depression is a calculated, willful, protracted, and self-serving attempt to gain sympathy and attention. If we conclude that a client has difficulty retaining jobs because of a congenital disability that he has tried persistently to overcome, we may be more willing to invest our professional time and energy than we would with a client who is fired from jobs repeatedly because he resents having to show up for work at 8:30 A.M. each day. Thus, our willingness to attribute responsibility for clients' problems to factors that are to some extent beyond their control can affect our willingness to assist them. The free will–determinism debate therefore has bearing not only on social workers' beliefs about the causes of clients' difficulties and their capacity to change but, as well, on their willingness to help them change.

One of the central pillars in the foundation of contemporary social work is the value of self-determination, a concept that is closely tied to assumptions about free will. Since the early 1900s, professional social workers have been guided by the assumption that a key mission of the profession is to help clients achieve what they want to achieve and to assist them in the formation and pursuit of meaningful goals. Underlying this principle, however, is a tacit assumption that clients have the capacity to chart and shape their lives—that they are not like billiard balls whose paths are fully determined by antecedent events—and, further, that they deserve social workers' assistance. It is thus clear that whatever position we take in the free will–determinism controversy, it stands to have a substantial effect on our inclination to uphold the longstanding principle of self-determination. Florence Hollis acknowledged this dilemma years ago in an address delivered at a United Nations seminar concerning the advanced study of social work: "The first question to be raised about these scientific principles is often the philosophical one of whether the assumption of lawfulness in behaviour and of cause and effect relationships in behaviour does not mean that casework has become completely deterministic. How can this be reconciled with the principle of self-determination?"²

The Nature of the Debate

The free will–determinism debate actually has ancient philosophical roots. Empedocles and Heraclitus, for example, are early sources of pre-Socratic thought on the meaning of determinism in nature and the idea of natural law. Ideas concerning determinism—especially the influence of divine will—were later given prominence in the fourth

century B.C. by the Stoics, the Greek school of philosophy founded by Zeno.

The origins of modern world debate about free will and determinism are ordinarily traced to the work of the eighteenth-century French astronomer and mathematician Pierre Simon de Laplace. Laplace's assertions about determinism in the world as we know it were heavily dependent upon the scientific theory of particle mechanics, according to which a knowledge of the mechanical state of all particles at some particular time together with a knowledge of "all the forces acting in nature" at that instant would enable one to discover all future and all past states of the world. With this information, one could, in principle, discover not only all future and past mechanical states in the world, but all others as well, such as electromagnetic, chemical, and psychological.³

The contemporary philosophical debate, as I noted above, boils down to a clash between those who credit human beings with the ability to make rational willful choices and to act upon those choices, independent—at least in part—of prior causes, and those who reject this view. Each ideological camp has noteworthy proponents whose views range from the moderate to the extreme. For extreme determinists, everything, including our thoughts, emotions, and behavior, is the effect of some prior cause. As the philosopher Ernest Nagel has observed, "determinism in its most general form appears to be the claim that for every set of characteristics which may occur at any time, there is some system that is deterministic in respect to those occurrences."⁴ The doctrine of determinism contains two essential ingredients: a belief in universal causal laws and the concept of predictability. In principle, any current state of affairs has identifiable determinants and knowable, predictable outcomes. According to determinism, then, problems such as mental illness, low self-esteem, poverty, crime, child abuse, and drug abuse can be traced to historical antecedents that have led progressively to the victim's current difficulties. The responsibility for the client's problems is not his or her own; rather, it resides in the onset and consequences of prior events. The implication of the determinist point of view, therefore, is that the client is not to be considered culpable. He is not to be blamed for his unfortunate circumstances. It may appear, of course, that clients engage in the formulation of rational, independent choices; but this, after all, is only an illusion, according to hard-core determinists. What appears to be free choice is itself a product of earlier influences, which may be a function of genetic endowment, physiology, child rearing, economics, politics, and an impressive number of other factors.

This conclusion means more, however, than that clients are not ultimately responsible for their problems. It also means that they are able to do little or nothing of consequence to ameliorate them. For

extreme determinists, the ability of individuals to make freely formed decisions about their futures is nonexistent. Whatever ability we have to change is merely the outcome of prior causes. The philosopher John Hospers has described this view succinctly:

The position, then, is this: if we *can* overcome the effects of early environment, the ability to do so is itself a product of the early environment. We did not give ourselves this ability; and if we lack it we cannot be blamed for not having it. Sometimes, to be sure, moral exhortation brings out an ability that is there but not being used, and in this lies its *occasional* utility; but very often its use is pointless, because the ability is not there. The only thing that can overcome a desire, as Spinoza said, is a stronger contrary desire; and many times there simply is no wherewithal for producing a stronger contrary desire. Those of us who do have the wherewithal are lucky.⁵

Acceptance of this conclusion would clearly throw cold water on both the mission and traditional methods of social work.

Proponents of the free will school of thought, alternatively, deny that the thoughts, emotions, and behavior of all individuals are, at all times, a function of prior causes over which individuals have little or no control. Adherents to this point of view generally fall short of claiming that no events are determined or that all events are truly random occurrences. Rather, they claim that some events follow from the exercise of free will or choice, that individuals do in fact have the capacity to behave independent of prior causes, though to varying degrees. As the ethicist Gerald Dworkin has noted, "The claim that we have free will is, then, the claim that for some actions at least the following condition is true: There is an alternative action (which may be simply refraining from the action to be performed) open to the agent. Put in the past tense after the agent has performed some action A: There was some alternative action which the agent could have performed other than the one which he in fact did."⁶ Formally, the following argument attempts to establish the notion of free will and deny determinism:

1. A necessary condition for holding a person responsible, blaming, or punishing him for an act, A, is that the person did A freely.
2. If determinism is true nobody ever acts freely.
3. Therefore, if determinism is true, no one is ever responsible, blameworthy, or punishable.
4. At least sometimes people are responsible, blameworthy, or punishable for what they do.
5. Therefore, determinism is false.⁷

Recognizing that questions may be raised about the technical validity of this argument, it represents, in sharp relief, the doctrine to which determinists are opposed. And the implications of the conclusion of

this syllogism are far from trivial. They bear heavily on the willingness of social workers to exhort, motivate, and generally work hard with clients to bring about meaningful changes in their lives.

An alternative to extreme views of either free will or determinism, but which contains elements of both schools of thought, has become known in philosophical circles as the “mixed view” or “soft determinism.” It is fair to say that currently the mixed view is the most prominent in circulation. It essentially entails three assumptions: (1) that the thesis of determinism is generally true, and that accordingly all human behavior—both voluntary and nonvoluntary—is preceded and caused by antecedent conditions, such that no other behavior is possible; (2) that genuinely voluntary behavior is nonetheless possible to the extent that it is not coerced; and (3) that, in the absence of coercion, voluntary behavior is brought about by the decisions, choices, and preferences of the individual himself.⁸ According to the mixed view, then, human behavior is neither wholly determined by external forces nor entirely random in nature. There is considerable room for voluntary action.

The Compatibility Argument

There is considerable evidence that the doctrine of soft determinism is relatively prominent in the profession of social work. In general, both the profession’s literature and conventional practice wisdom embrace the view that the problems under which clients labor are frequently the products of circumstances beyond their control, to varying degrees, and that clients themselves are at times partly responsible for their difficulties and are—again, to varying degrees—capable of making thoughtful, rational, and voluntary decisions to alter the course of their lives. Florence Hollis has summarized this sentiment well: “The casework position, I would think, would not be that of absolutism in either direction. We certainly do not take the libertarian stand that each action of man is completely free and unaffected by his previous character, life history, or current experience. On the other hand, neither do we believe that all choice, all behavior is the determined, necessary and inflexible result of previously existing physical or environmental causes.”⁹

This position is based on what philosophers generally refer to as the compatibility argument, according to which the free will and determinist views are not, contrary to first impressions, necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, they can be complementary. This is a view that has been espoused over the years by such noteworthy philosophers as Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill.¹⁰

The compatibility doctrine is thus in sharp contrast to the view of those who argue that to admit the possibility of free will is to deny determinism, and vice versa. According to the so-called incompatibilist, the world and its events cannot be explained by appealing to both the free will and determinism doctrines. As the philosopher Richard Taylor has observed with respect to the incompatibility thesis, "Ultimate responsibility for anything that exists, and hence for any man and his deeds, can thus only rest with the first cause of all things, if there is such a cause, or nowhere at all, in case there is not."¹¹

Though the predominant view in social work is generally consistent with soft determinism, it is nonetheless clear that there is considerable variation of opinion within the profession about the extent to which clients are truly victims of circumstances and prior determinants beyond their control, as opposed to willful actors who have brought their difficulties upon themselves. For example, in their recent review of the ideological assumptions, contained, either implicitly or explicitly, in introductory social work texts, Ephross and Reisch document considerable variation in authors' emphases on cultural, economic, political, and environmental determinants of social problems.¹² The texts fell generally into three groups: (1) those that attribute clients' difficulties largely to factors that are beyond their control; (2) those that stress the capacity of individuals to fashion their own lives and futures, while recognizing somewhat the effects of external factors; and (3) those that stand midway between these two positions, in that they acknowledge clearly "the connections between social work clients and societal forces and events."¹³ Though their discussion is not couched in the philosophical language of the free will-determinism debate, it is clear that Ephross and Reisch grasp the implications of the controversy for social work when they conclude that:

there are clear differences among the books reviewed as to social, political, and economic content, and it seems that these differences are quite important for the education of professional social workers. In a sense, one can distribute these introductory textbooks over an ideological spectrum. The temptation is to visualize such a spectrum as covering a range from "Left" to "Right." These terms are used a bit unconventionally here; they do not imply that the authors adhere to all of the political views commonly associated with Left or Right positions. Rather, the idea is of a scale whose polar points describe conceptions of the relationship between societal forces and individual experiences. The Left pole, then, encompasses the position that individuals' lives are circumscribed and heavily influenced, if not determined, by political, economic, and institutional patterns within society. The Right pole attributes to individuals and families a great deal of leeway to determine their individual and interpersonal experiences.¹⁴

As observed above, the impressive variation in social workers' opinions about the extent to which present and future circumstances are shaped

by voluntary versus deterministic factors has several noteworthy implications for professional practice. These implications can be placed generally into two categories. First, there are implications related to the views social workers have of the culpability and capacity of the clients with whom they work. Second, there are implications concerning the extent to which social workers believe clients deserve assistance.

The Culpability and Capacity of Clients

Though social workers are generally predisposed to identify and understand both individual and environmental determinants of clients' problems, it is evident that our views of the extent to which clients are responsible for their difficulties vary considerably. On the one hand are clients whose problems seem due to circumstances well beyond their control. These are clients who, we conclude, have not brought problems upon themselves. They are true victims. Infants who have been physically abused or neglected, people with congenital defects (such as physical deformities or mental retardation), and those who are diseased at birth are, by and large, regarded as clients who were dealt an unfortunate hand at the very start of life. They have not behaved in ways that we consider to have invited the serious problems from which they suffer.

At the other extreme are clients who, we are at least at times inclined to believe, have made voluntary decisions to lead their lives in ways that produce serious problems. Thus, ablebodied poor and unemployed who choose not to work merely because of their aversion to the task, drug abusers, and criminals are frequently viewed as clients who have, so to speak, asked for their troubles. Ablebodied poor could work, drug abusers could abstain, and criminals could cease and desist if they really wanted to. They have simply exercised their free will to the contrary. A true determinist, of course, would argue that there are reasons why these people have chosen their problem-laden lifestyles; they may suffer from a wide variety of intrapsychic maladies, economic obstacles, or political impediments that prevent them from behaving otherwise, though on the surface it appears that they have voluntarily chosen their current circumstances. However, though there may be some truth to the determinist's contentions in such cases, what is important is that many social workers see these clients as culpable—as exercising their free will—and this ultimately affects our professional response to them.

Between these two extremes, of course, are those who seem to straddle the free will—determinism fence. These are the clients about whom

we are most ambivalent. In their cases we tend to feel torn, caught between an intellectual understanding of the factors that may have brought about their distress and the frustration of feeling that they may have themselves contributed voluntarily to the problem in a significant way, or not done enough to remedy it. With juvenile delinquents, for example, social workers have helped blaze a long-standing trail of theory constructed to account for youthful mischief. There is by now a familiar litany of factors cited to “explain” juvenile delinquency: broken homes, child abuse, inferior education, poor role models, exposure to drugs, and so on. However, despite our intellectual understanding of the antecedents or determinants of delinquency, many of us nonetheless are tempted to hold many of these youths responsible for their misbehavior. If they would only care enough about themselves, think about their behavior and the feelings of others more carefully, and take a critical look at their own values, they could surely mend their ways. In the final analysis, it is tempting to think that the fault may be theirs. We sometimes think similarly about certain aged clients, for example, whose forgetfulness, clumsiness, and poor hygiene may annoy us; though their increasing frailty may “explain” their behavior, it is at times tempting to believe that these nuisances could be relieved considerably if they would only try harder. The same holds for those clients who now make up a very substantial portion of the social work profession’s caseload: those who are experiencing one or more of a wide range of emotional difficulties, such as poor self-esteem, marital conflict, depression, loneliness, or some generalized form of anxiety.

The Boundaries of Moral Responsibility

The form and extent of the assistance that social workers choose to provide for their clients are influenced in important ways by the degree to which they hold their clients responsible for their problems. In this respect, there is a close relationship in social work between the concepts of moral responsibility and moral desert.

The concept of moral responsibility implies that individuals can, or ought to be, held accountable for their problems and mischief. Of course, to assert such a claim is to embrace, at least partially, the notion of free will. It would, after all, be irrational to argue that an individual whose problems are entirely due to factors beyond his or her control (hard-core determinism) is one who should, at the same time, be held accountable for them. To attribute fault or blame in such cases would fly in the face of logic as we know it. As David Hume observed in his eighteenth-century work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

'Tis only upon the principles of necessity, that a person acquires any merit or demerit from his actions. . . . Actions are by their very nature temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some cause in the characters and disposition of the person, who perform'd them, they infix not themselves upon him, and can neither redound to his honour, if good, nor infamy, if evil. The action in itself may be blameable. . . . But the person is not responsible for it; and as it proceeded from nothing in him, that is durable and constant, and leaves nothing of that nature behind it, 'tis impossible he can, upon its account, become the object of punishment or vengeance.¹⁵

Yet, though there may be general agreement within the profession that clients whose problems are due to circumstances beyond their control should not be held responsible for them, there is much less clarity about what factors determine whether an individual is truly a victim or not.

Centuries ago, Aristotle argued that an individual is responsible only for those actions that are voluntary in nature. According to Aristotle, there are two principal ways in which an action can fail to be voluntary: it can be the result of compulsion, or it can be carried out in ignorance.¹⁶ Thus, if an oncoming and recklessly driven auto forces you off the road, and in doing so causes your passenger to be injured, you have been compelled—due to circumstances we would ordinarily consider to be beyond your control—to act as you did. We would not be likely to hold you morally responsible for your passenger's injuries. Further, if there were some latent defect in your living room chair, and a guest fell from it and harmed himself, common sense suggests that you should not be held at fault.

A persistent problem, however, is that while there may be some general agreement that coercion and ignorance preclude the assignment of moral blame, social workers (and others) have had little success reaching agreement about what, in fact, constitutes genuine coercion and ignorance. Take the problem of poverty, for example. There is at least a general predisposition in the profession to identify the following factors as explaining why many people are poor: poor education, racism and discrimination, Western capitalism, single-parent status, poor health and nutrition, and a host of related liabilities. But, can we say that these factors—acting independently or in concert—constitute coercion and ignorance in the strict sense? It is not hard for us to agree that a gun held at our back or organic brain disease constitute coercion (though in different forms). But what of factors that are, at least according to conventional wisdom, highly correlated with poverty? Is it reasonable to assert that these factors compel or coerce individuals into poverty? Further, what, if any, distinctions should we make between intraindividual factors (physiological or psychological), which can be coercive, and extraindividual factors? Clearly, the degree to which we view poverty as a voluntary or coerced state

has profound implications for our response to it. As the philosopher J. J. C. Smart observed in an essay on the concepts of free will, praise, and blame:

When, in nineteenth-century England, the rich man brushed aside all consideration for his unsuccessful rivals in the battle for wealth and position, and looking at them as they starved in the gutter said to himself, "Well, they had the same opportunities as I had. If I took more advantage of them than they did, that is not my fault but theirs," he was most probably not only callous but (as I shall try to show) metaphysically confused. A man who said "Heredity and environment made me what I am and made them what they are" would be less likely to fall a prey to this sort of callousness and indifference. Metaphysical views about free will are therefore practically important, and their importance is often in inverse proportion to their clarity.¹⁷

A related problem concerns confusion about the distinction between holding clients morally responsible for actions that they engage in and actions that they *fail* to engage in. Child abuse, for example, is an act of commission for which we are ordinarily inclined to hold individuals at least partly responsible, though we may, to some extent, be able to identify reasons that explain their behavior. Child neglect, on the other hand, is an act of omission. Thus, it appears that the free will–determinism debate bears on failures to act, in addition to the more common concern social workers have with clients whose acts of commission draw attention.¹⁸

Ordinarily, three preconditions must be satisfied in order to hold an individual liable for his or her actions or inaction. First, it must be established that the individual committed the harmful act, or at least that the action or omission made a substantial contribution to it. Second, the individual's conduct must have been in some way faulty. Finally, it must be established that there was a causal connection between the faulty conduct and the reprehensible outcome.¹⁹ Granted, it is often difficult to establish the presence of these preconditions in social work. The evidence is not always adequate to determine that a client did commit or failed to commit the act of interest. Further, it is often hard to know whether the conduct was in fact faulty and led to, in a causal way, the regrettable outcome. Nonetheless, practitioners do, in their day-to-day work, make such judgments about moral responsibility, and these judgments affect the form and content of our responses to clients' problems. As I will discuss below, our judgments about what clients deserve are frequently predicated upon our attributions of moral responsibility.

The Concept of Desert

The concept of desert has a variety of connotations, both in general and in the profession of social work. These connotations may be positive,

as in the case of awarding prizes or rewards for athletic, artistic, or scholarly achievements, or negative, as in the case of penalties or punishments imposed for misbehavior. Clients may deserve to be rewarded, such as when residents of a group home are awarded additional privileges following a period of good behavior, or penalized, such as when a client's unemployment benefits are discontinued due to the reporting of false information. The concept of desert can also have relatively neutral connotations, such as when retirement or workers' compensation funds are distributed to those who deserve them. Therefore, the concept of desert is closely related to both retributive and distributive justice. Retributive justice is concerned with penalties and rewards. Distributive justice is concerned with allocating services and resources.²⁰

The free will–determinism debate, as it pertains to social work, is most closely related to issues of retributive justice. That is, the extent to which practitioners are likely to reward or penalize clients is likely to be a function of their beliefs about the degree to which clients are responsible for their behavior or problems. Consider, for example, our response to criminals. Those of us who believe that armed robbers are rational individuals who voluntarily decide to assault their victims are tempted to endorse the imposition of penalties, in the name of punishment, retribution, and, perhaps, deterrence. Justice demands that the perpetrator be held accountable to the community for his or her misdeeds. Immanuel Kant is ordinarily credited with the classic statement concerning this so-called retributivist point of view:

But what is the mode and measure of punishment which public justice takes as its principle and standard? It is just the principle of equality, by which the pointer of the scale of justice is made to incline no more to the one side than the other. It may be rendered by saying that the undeserved evil which any one commits on another, is to be regarded as perpetrated on himself. . . . This is the right of retaliation (*jus talionis*); and properly understood, it is the only principle which in regulating a public court, as distinguished from mere private judgment, can definitely assign both the quality and quantity of a just penalty.²¹

A strict determinist, however, would make no such demands; unpleasant but compelling reasons can be found to explain the offender's behavior. It is simply inappropriate to conclude that the offense was the product of rational free will. As the attorney Clarence Darrow once said to inmates confined in Cook County (Chicago) Jail: "I do not believe in any sort of distinction between the real moral conditions of the people in and out of jail. . . . I do not believe that people are in jail because they deserve to be. They are in jail simply because they cannot avoid it on account of circumstances which are entirely beyond their control and for which they are in no way responsible."²² An excerpt from John Hospers's classic essay, "What Means This Freedom?" summarizes suc-

cinctly the determinist's position on this issue as viewed through the philosopher's lens:

There are many actions—not those of an insane person (however the term “insane” be defined), nor of a person ignorant of the effects of his action, nor ignorant of some relevant fact about the situation, nor in any obvious way mentally deranged—for which human beings in general and the courts in particular are inclined to hold the doer responsible, and for which, I would say, he should not be held responsible. . . . Let us take as an example a criminal who, let us say, strangled several persons and is himself now condemned to die in the electric chair. Jury and public alike hold him fully responsible (at least they utter the words “he is responsible”), for the murders were planned down to the minutest detail, and the defendant tells the jury exactly how he planned them. But now we find out how it all came about; we learn of parents who rejected him from babyhood, of the childhood spent in one foster home after another, where it was always plain to him that he was not wanted; of the constantly frustrated early desire for affection, the hard shell of nonchalance and bitterness that he assumed to cover the painful and humiliating fact of being unwanted, and his subsequent attempts to heal these wounds to his shattered ego through defensive aggression.²³

A final comment is in order on the concept of desert and its relevance to social work. Though our beliefs about the victimization of clients frequently lead us to conclude that they should not be held accountable for their actions (and therefore deserve assistance) on occasion our sentiments about particular clients' moral worth can taint and dilute these convictions. Social workers' long-standing involvement with the poor illustrates this point. The profession has, generally speaking, been cognizant of and sympathetic to the reasons why people are poor. We are painfully aware that physical and mental disability, entrenched racism and discrimination, cyclical and structural unemployment, and age—factors over which individuals ordinarily do not have much control—account for the lion's share of those who are below the official poverty line. The percentage of poor who are genuinely able-bodied is impressively low. Nonetheless, there can be found in many professional social work circles at least a subtle contempt for the poor, a feeling that, despite all we know, many of these people neither appreciate nor, perhaps, are worthy of our various services and ministrations. In some instances, our latent resentment of our clients casts a shadow on our intellectual understanding of their status as victim. The philosopher Harry Frankfurt commented on this problem in an essay on the subject of coercion and moral responsibility:

We do on some occasions find it appropriate to make an adverse judgment concerning a person's submission to a threat, even though we recognise that he has genuinely been coerced and that he is therefore not properly to be held morally responsible for his submission. This is because we think that the person, although he was in fact quite unable to control a desire, ought to

have been able to control it. . . . It may be that we have a low opinion of someone who is incapable of defying a threat of the kind in question; and our judgment that he ought to have been able to defy it may express this feeling that he is not much of a man. This has nothing to do with judging him as deserving blame—if he should feel anything, it is not guilt but shame—and it is entirely compatible with the belief that he had actually no choice but to do what he did. Indeed it depends upon this belief. It is just because we recognise that we cannot expect better from him that we hold him in a certain contempt.²⁴

The Paradox of Determinism

My comments thus far have concerned the implications of the free will–determinism debate for the views social workers have of the culpability, capacity, and worthiness of clients. It is important to note, however, that frequently issues related to free will and determinism bear on clients' views of themselves, their interpretation of past events, and their fantasies about the future. A letter that I recently received from an inmate with whom I once worked in a state penitentiary illustrates this. This young man is serving a sentence for murder. During the course of our work together we had spent some time speculating about why he killed the people he did. His case was complicated by the fact that he was under the influence of potent drugs at the time of the murders.

The history of abuse and neglect to which this fellow had been subjected as a child is filled with a series of disconcerting events. Listening to his life story, it is no surprise that he followed a wayward path. Yet until the night when he murdered neighbors he barely knew—for no apparent reason—he had committed no serious acts of violence and had had only minor brushes with the law. He too found something terribly mystifying about his crime. In the end, he could not help but wonder whether he is ultimately responsible for what he had done: "In my own case," he wrote, "I didn't want to kill anyone, didn't intend to, and realized I had done so only after it was done. I guess that's why I hate myself. Because I lost control of myself while on drugs and killed three people. It's simple to say, well, I was on drugs and didn't know what I was doing. But then no one forced the drugs on me. I took them on my own free will. So who's to blame?"

One of the ironies of social work is that both members of the profession and their clients tend to embrace simultaneously both the free will and determinism doctrines. On the one hand, we persistently pursue the discovery of grand psychological, sociological, political, and economic theories that will enable us to fully grasp how and why people become

plagued by (or plague themselves with) problems in living. If we were in fact successful in our quest for full understanding, we would have, by definition, established a chain of causal connections between antecedent conditions or events and the problems under which people labor, thereby establishing the validity of determinism. Yet, the implications of such determinism for a profession such as social work are profound, given the earnestness of our collective belief that individuals have a considerable capacity to shape their lives and futures. We frequently view clients' problems deterministically—attempting to locate intra- and extraindividual factors that account for problematic behaviors and attitudes—yet our forms of intervention spring from assumptions about free will and self-determination.²⁵ As Tolstoy once noted regarding this paradox, "The problem of free will from earliest times has occupied the best intellects of mankind and has from earliest times appeared in all its colossal significance. The problem lies in the fact that if we regard man as a subject for observation from whatever point of view—theological, historical, ethical or philosophic—we find the universal law of necessity to which he (like everything else that exists) is subject. But looking upon man from within ourselves—man as the object of our own inner consciousness of self—we feel ourselves to be free."²⁶ There is thus an enduring tension between our desire to understand and explain human affairs by uncovering detailed causal connections and our need to see ourselves, and others, as autonomous individuals who are not subject entirely to intrapsychic, biological, and environmental factors that lie beyond our control.

Throughout the history of social work there has been some shift between our emphasis on free will and determinism, largely as a function of the passage of broader political, historical, and philosophical world views. For example, there was considerably more emphasis on the moral culpability of clients during the heyday of the Charity Organization Society than during the subsequent growth of the settlement house movement. This was the result of a growing recognition that poverty and its correlates are frequently the result of external determinants, not failures of individual character.²⁷ The politics of the Progressive Era were in sharp contrast to those that sanctioned and encouraged the nineteenth-century free market philosophy that depended heavily on assumptions of free will, self-determination, and individual autonomy. The disconcerting events of the Great Depression of the 1930s also shifted considerable weight toward the determinism side of the scale, as did the popularization of Marxism and the noteworthy influence of Freudian views of human behavior that captured the attention of the social work profession. Currently, we appear to be in the midst of a partial ideological shift away from determinism—at least as reflected by contemporary social welfare policies promulgated by federal and state politicians, legislators, and administrators—toward the view that

many of our domestic problems (e.g., poverty, crime) could be solved if only we had the (free) will to confront them.²⁸

The main point is that these broad shifts in world view have always managed to plant ideological seeds in social work, and the outgrowths have had significant effects on the resources available to and strategies of the profession's practitioners. In general, the greater the emphasis on determinism, the greater social workers' emphasis on social change has been; the greater the emphasis on individual autonomy and free will, the greater the profession's emphasis on casework and client self-determination. As the philosopher R. F. Stalley has observed, "the main effect of the acceptance of a doctrine of determinism with all its implications would probably be to turn the attention of social workers away from casework with individuals to other kinds of social action. . . . If, on the other hand, human behaviour is not determined by the environment there will still be some problems, however much the environment is improved, and only work with the individual could help to solve these."²⁹

It is essential for social workers to appreciate the implications of their embrace of the free will or determinism doctrines, whether in their extreme or moderate forms. The views we develop of our clients' moral responsibility and capacity for change are a function in large part of the position we take in the free will–determinism debate. It is unlikely, of course, that this debate will ever be fully resolved. As Tolstoy noted, there is something compelling about both theses. There is incontrovertible evidence that much of human action is affected by forces that extend beyond individual control and choice. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that determinism does not have limits, that human beings do not in fact maintain some degree of nontrivial control over their own lives, even if some of what we call autonomy is an illusion.³⁰

The physical and natural sciences by now have an impressive collection of data and theories that explain large numbers of phenomena in our world, a record that surpasses by far the accomplishments in the social sciences. Laplace's early observations concerning particle mechanics in physics served as the forerunner of a proliferation of deterministic accounts of both physical and social events. However, despite the noteworthy achievements of the world of science, when we aggregate our findings we have failed to explain adequately many of the phenomena about which we care most. We still know distressingly little, for example, about why some people neglect their children, abuse drugs, become depressed, commit crimes, and take their own lives. Our multivariate analyses frequently turn up little beyond the obvious, ultimately explaining, in too many instances, a discouragingly small percentage of the variance in our dependent variables. We know a lot as a result of our decades of empirical inquiry, but we must recognize that the boundaries that enclose our current knowledge are still relatively

narrow. We are far from a true determinist's understanding of the world in which we live. And, as the Oxford philosopher Anthony Kenny has reflected, there must be a certain modesty in our expectations:

One may query whether we have any reason to believe that there can be a successful science of human behavior; but this response will no doubt appear unhelpful and pessimistic. It may be more productive to inquire from what features of the history of scientific progress one is supposed to extrapolate. Is one to point to the success of deterministic explanation in Newtonian mechanics, or to its lack of success in stimulus-response psychology? It is impossible not to be impressed by the present availability of mechanistic explanations for many physical phenomena which were explained teleologically until the time of Descartes. But perhaps one should be no less impressed by the continuing impossibility of explaining, in terms of sufficient antecedent conditions, any psychological phenomenon which would have been regarded as voluntary in the time of Aristotle.³¹

The intractability of the free will–determinism debate has led to some unfortunate frustration in our efforts to understand life's events and design responses to them when problems arise. But the persistence of the debate has also taught us important lessons. Controversies that remain unresolved after centuries of sustained attention rarely concern trivial matters. The free will–determinism debate endures because it entails concepts that are fundamentally important. Even if our labored attempts to resolve this debate do not settle the controversy, we will have, in the process, addressed ourselves to matters that represent the heart of our profession. In the final analysis, social workers will likely continue to espouse a mixed or soft view of determinism, believing both that clients' problems are, to a considerable extent, the products of prior causes, and that the voluntary action of clients can contribute to their problems and help to solve them. Assuming this to be so, the personal conclusions we reach about the moral responsibility and capacity of clients (whether voluntarily or as a result of our own historical antecedents) stand to have significant consequences for the people with whom we work.

Notes

1. *Time* (October 4, 1982), p. 6.
2. Florence Hollis, "Principles and Assumptions Underlying Casework Practice" (lecture delivered at United Nations seminar for the advanced study of social work; cited in R. F. Stalley, "Determinism and the Principle of Client Self-Determination," in *Self-Determination in Social Work*, ed. F. E. McDermott [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975], p. 93).

3. "General Introduction," in *Free Will and Determinism*, ed. Bernard Berofsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 3.
4. Ernest Nagel, "Determinism in History," in *Determinism, Free Will, and Moral Responsibility*, ed. Gerald Dworkin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 55.
5. John Hospers, "What Means This Freedom?" in Berofsky, ed., p. 40.
6. "Introduction," in Dworkin, ed., p. 6.
7. For discussion of this argument, see Dworkin, ed., pp. 5–9.
8. See, e.g., Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 43–44.
9. Hollis (n. 2 above), pp. 106–7.
10. See Carl Ginet, "Can the Will Be Caused?" *Philosophical Review* 71 (1962): 49–55.
11. Taylor (n. 8 above), p. 36.
12. Paul H. Ephross and Michael Reisch, "The Ideology of Some Social Work Texts," *Social Service Review* 56 (1982): 273–91.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
14. *Ibid.*
15. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, bk. 2, pt. 3, sec. 2.
16. For discussion of Aristotle's argument, see Joel Feinberg, *Doing and Deserving: Essays in the Theory of Responsibility* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 274–75.
17. J. J. C. Smart, "Free Will, Praise and Blame," in Dworkin, ed. (n. 4 above), p. 197.
18. For detailed discussion of the distinction between acts of omission and acts of commission, see J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 93–100; Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 34–35, 51–52; Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), esp. pp. 217 ff.; and Frederic G. Reamer, *Ethical Dilemmas in Social Service* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), esp. pp. 197–204.
19. For further discussion of the concept of moral liability, see Joel Feinberg, "Collective Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968): 674–88.
20. For detailed discussion of the concept of moral desert, see J. O. Urmson, "On Grading," in *Logic and Language*, ed. A. G. N. Flew (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953); H. L. Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); Jeremy Bentham, "The Rationale of Punishment," in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. J. Bowring (Edinburgh: W. Tait, 1843), and *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948), chap. 13; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Works of Aristotle*, trans. W. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), pp. 15–19; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950), pp. 266–69; Plato, *Gorgias*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 262–63; G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), sec. 100; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Publishing Co., 1947), esp. bk. 2, pt. 2-2, quest. 108, first article; and Gertrude Ezorsky, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives on Punishment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972).
21. Immanuel Kant, "Justice and Punishment (continued)," in Ezorsky, ed. (n. 20 above), p. 104.
22. Quoted in "Introduction," in Dworkin, ed. (n. 4 above), p. 1.
23. Hospers (n. 5 above), pp. 26, 33.
24. Harry G. Frankfurt, "Coercion and Moral Responsibility," in *Essays on Freedom of Action*, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 79.
25. It is important to note that some treatment approaches in social work make stronger assumptions about free will than others. Compare, e.g., traditional psychoanalytic assumptions about the deterministic influence of the sub- or unconscious mind, or assumptions typically voiced by behaviorists about the effect of environmental contingencies, with the points of view presented by individuals such as Jessie Taft, Virginia Robinson, Florence Hollis, and Helen Harris Perlman. For an informative discussion of the extent to which various treatment theories acknowledge the importance of the

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client's own cognitive resources, see Howard Goldstein, "Cognitive Approaches to Direct Practice," *Social Service Review* 56 (1982): 539–55. Also see Michael J. Lillyquist, *Understanding and Changing Criminal Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), pp. 148–66.

26 Quoted in Anthony Kenny, "Freedom, Spontaneity, and Indifference," in Honderich, ed. (n. 24 above), p. 89.

27. See Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 18–20.

28. See David Stoesz, "A Wake for the Welfare State: Social Welfare and the Neo-conservative Challenge," *Social Service Review* 55 (1981): 398–410, and Frederic G. Reamer, "Social Services in a Conservative Era," *Social Casework* (in press), for discussions of the conservative shift in social welfare policy in the United States.

29. Stalley (n. 2 above), p. 104.

30. For a thoughtful review of issues related to the subject of autonomy and determinism in social work, see Helen Harris Perlman, "Self-Determination: Reality or Illusion?" *Social Service Review* 39 (1965): 410–21.

31. Kenny, in Honderich, ed. (n. 24 above), p. 104. For a rich debate concerning the accomplishments and potential of empirical research in social work, see Martha Brunswick Heineman, "The Obsolete Scientific Imperative in Social Work Research," *Social Service Review* 55 (1981): 371–97, and Walter W. Hudson, "Scientific Imperatives in Social Work Research and Practice," *Social Service Review* 56 (1982): 246–58.