



## **Fate and Free Will**

Sri Aurobindo

A question which has hitherto divided human thought and received no final solution, is the freedom of the human being in his relation to the Power intelligent or unintelligent that rules the world. We strive for freedom in our human relations, to freedom we move as our goal, and every fresh step in our human progress is a further approximation to our ideal. But are we free in ourselves? We seem to be free, to do that which we choose and not that which is chosen for us; but it is possible that the freedom may be illusory and our apparent freedom may be a real and iron bondage. We may be bound by predestination, the will of a Supreme Intelligent Power, or blind inexorable Nature, or the necessity of our own previous development.

The first is the answer of the devout and submissive mind in its dependence on God, but, unless we adopt a Calvinistic fatalism, the admission of the guiding and overriding will of God does not exclude the permission of freedom to the individual. The second is the answer of the scientist; Heredity determines our Nature, the laws of Nature limit our action, cause and effect compel the course of our development, and, if it be urged that we may determine effects by creating causes, the answer is that our own actions are determined by previous causes over which we have no control and our action itself is a necessary response to a stimulus from outside. The third is the answer of the Buddhist and of post-Buddhistic Hinduism. “It is our fate, it is written on our forehead, when our Karma is exhausted, then alone our calamities will pass from us” — this is the spirit of tamasic inaction justifying itself by a misreading of the theory of Karma.

If we go back to the true Hindu teaching independent of Buddhistic influence, we shall find that it gives us a reconciliation of the dispute by a view of man’s psychology in which both Fate and Free-will are recognised. The difference between Buddhism and Hinduism is that to the former the human soul is nothing, to the latter it is everything. The whole universe exists in the spirit, by the spirit, for the spirit; all we do, think and feel is for the spirit. Nature depends upon the Atman, all its movement, play, action is for the Atman.

There is no Fate except insistent causality which is only another name for Law, and Law itself is only an instrument in the hands of Nature for the satisfaction of the spirit. Law is nothing but a mode or rule of action; it is called in our philosophy not Law but Dharma, holding together, it is that by which the action of the universe, the action of its parts, the action of the individual is held together. This action in the universal, the parts, the individuals is called Karma, work, action, energy in play, and the definition of Dharma or Law is action as decided by the nature of the thing in which action takes place—svabhava-niyatam karma. Each separate existence, each individual has a swabhava or nature and acts according to it, each group, species or mass of individuals has a swabhava or nature and acts according to it, and the universe also has its swabhava or nature and acts according to it. Mankind is a group of individuals and every man acts according to his human nature,

that is his law of being as distinct from animals, trees or other groups of individuals. Each man has a distinct nature of his own and that is his law of being which ought to guide him as an individual. But beyond and above these minor laws is the great dharma of the universe which provides that certain previous karma or action must lead to certain new karma or results.

The whole of causality may be defined as previous action leading to subsequent action, Karma and Karmaphal. The Hindu theory is that thought and feeling, as well as actual speech or deeds, are part of Karma and create effects, and we do not accept the European sentiment that outward expression of thought and feeling in speech or deed is more important than the thought or feeling itself.

This outward expression is only part of the thing expressed and its results are only part of the Karmaphal. The previous karma has not one kind of result but many.

In the first place, a certain habit of thought or feeling produces certain actions and speech or certain habits of action and speech in this life, which materialise in the next as good fortune or evil fortune. Again, it produces by its action for the good or ill of others a necessity of happiness or sorrow for ourselves in another birth. It produces, moreover, a tendency to persistence of that habit of thought or feeling in future lives, which involves the persistence of the good fortune or evil fortune, happiness or sorrow. Or, acting on different lines, it produces a revolt or reaction and replacement by opposite habits which in their turn necessitate opposite results for good or evil. This is the chain of karma, the bondage of works, which is the Hindu Fate and from which the Hindus seek salvation.

If, however, there is no escape from the Law, if Nature is supreme and inexorable, there can be no salvation; freedom becomes a chimaera, bondage eternal. There can be no escape, unless there is something within us which is free and lord, superior to Nature. This entity the Hindu teaching finds in the spirit ever free and blissful which is one in essence and in reality with the Supreme Soul of the Universe. The spirit does not act, it is Nature that contains the action. If the spirit acted, it would be bound by its action. The thing that acts is Prakriti, Nature, which determines the Swabhava of things and is the source and condition of Law or dharma. The soul or Purusha holds up the swabhava, watches and enjoys the action and its fruit, sanctions the law or dharma. It is the king, Lord or Ishwara without whose consent nothing can be done by Prakriti. But the king is above the law and free.

It is this power of sanction that forms the element of free will in our lives.

The spirit consents not that itself shall be bound, but that its enjoyment should be bound by time, space and causality and by the swabhava and the dharma. It consents to virtue or sin, good fortune or evil fortune, health or disease, joy or suffering, or it refuses them. What it is attached to, that Nature multiplies for it; what it is weary of, has vairagya for, that Nature withdraws from it. Only, because the enjoyment is in space and time, therefore, even after the withdrawal of consent, the habitual action continues for a time just as the locomotive continues to move after the steam is shut off, but in a little while it slows down and finally comes to a standstill. And because the enjoyment is in causality, the removal of the habit of action is effected not spontaneously and freely, but by an established process or one of many established processes. This is the great truth now dawning on the world, that Will is the thing which moves the world and that Fate is merely a process by which Will fulfils itself.

But in order to feel its mastery of Nature, the human soul must put itself into communion

with the infinite and universal Spirit. Its will must be one with the universal Will. The human soul is one with the universal Spirit, but in the body it stands out as something separate and unconnected, because a certain freedom is permitted it in order that the swabhava of things may be diversely developed in different bodies. In using this freedom the soul may do it ignorantly or knowingly.

If it uses it ignorantly, it is not really free, for ignorance brings with it the illusion of enslavement to Nature. Used knowingly, the freedom of the soul becomes one with surrender to the universal Will. Either apparent bondage to Fate in Nature or realised freedom from Nature in the universal freedom and lordship of the Paramatman and Parameshwara, this is the choice offered to the human soul.

The gradual self-liberation from bondage to Nature is the true progress of humanity. The inert stone or block is a passive sport of natural laws, God is their Master. Man stands between these two extreme terms and moves upward from one to the other.

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