

Chapter II

FREEDOM

A Jewish theory of character is immediately suspect from the perspectives of contemporary man, because of its peculiar conception of the role of freedom in man's control of his own future character development. Its view of freedom as a key element in a moral conception of character -- and the three terms "Jewish," "moral," and "character" ^{are} each independently ~~is~~ unthinkable without the presupposition that, to some extent, man retains a core of free will -- must be stated in contrast to two contradictory tendencies in the thought of our times. The first is the whole scientific tradition which constitutes the "established" scholarship of our day -- scientific, psychological, and philosophical; and the second is the counter-culture whose radicalism and romanticism have so profoundly affected the lives and consciousness of its adherents, and of ^{many} others as well.

Despite an ongoing tradition of criticism of its stifling determinism, the established scholarly disciplines of the Western world have for the greatest part embraced the principle of necessity and causality, and diminished the role of the freedom of the will to the vanishing point. Biology, sociology, history, and now to some extent the law as well, have become the modern elaborations and extrapolations, with greater or lesser variety, of the old determinism of Parmenides, Democritus, and (later) Laplace. Man is more and more seen as externalized, an object of Nature qualitatively no different from any other natural thing, and hence devoid of any significant interiority or internality that marks

him off from the rest of the natural order. Free decisions, will, novelty, uniqueness, responsibility, morality, and (of course!) such entities as soul, metaphysical yearnings, the desire for self-transcendence, religious aspirations --- ^{considered by the dominant and domineering positivism of our day as} all these are illusions thrown up by the biophysical organism ^{and} ~~that~~ have no intrinsic worth. Man, Darwin taught, is an animal, and an animal, as we all know, is a machine; ~~and~~ hence, by this simple equation in the name of Science, Man is but a machine. An advanced machine, a complex machine, a cybernetic machine, but fundamentally that and nothing more. Life and intelligence are reducible to the interaction of cells and genes, they in turn to complicated but ordered chemical reactions, and they in their turn to physical and finally mathematical formulae. Man is thus as little able to determine his own destiny, even his own personality and moral quality, as a differential equation can will itself (other than to) the correct solution. In such a context, to speak of moral character -- indeed, to speak of character as such -- is an exercise in meaningless prattle. moralistic double-talk.

Psychology is especially significant in this respect. The psychology of our day -- largely behavioristic and usually deterministic -- leaves little room ~~indeed~~ for a philosophy of character in which will, reason, freedom, choice, and spontaneous self-activity play a significant role. A religious conception of character in which certain modes of conduct are termed moral or immoral, right or wrong, cannot survive incarceration in the Skinner Box of most of contemporary psychological theory. Indeed, all traditional moral concepts become irrelevant -- responsibility, values, judgment. Only behavior counts; character has been banished from the Kingdom of Science.

Yet Judaism, to be true to itself, must take its stand against the comprehensive determinism and ^{the} thorough-going positivism and relativism that characterizes so much of modern thinking about the human personality. Perhaps it is only an act of faith that leads the committed Jew to assert the reality of choice and will and freedom in the face of such determined opposition. Perhaps it is the accumulated historic experience of millenia of reflection on man and his predicament. But certainly it is undergirded with an additional ^{item} ~~xxx~~ of faith -- that science, social and natural, will ultimately lead to the same conclusion: that despite nature and nurture, instinct and impulse, causality and unconscious motivation, there is in man a vital core of freedom that makes of him something more than a blob of protoplasm, more than a functioning machine, more than a walking computer. It is an act of faith -- or, better, confidence -- that behaviorism, after it will have made its contribution to the treasury of man's wisdom about man, ^{be accepted in its current, radical form,} will not ~~carry the day~~ but will be modified by the recognition that, after all, man is not only object but also subject, not only a part of the external world but also by himself a whole internal "world." "He who destroys one man destroys an entire world," said the Sages of the Jerusalem Talmud, "and he who saves one man saves an entire world."

The Jewish tradition, in its main-stream conception of man, would look with much greater favor on Kant, to take one example of a major thinker ^{from amongst} ~~of~~ those who took human freedom seriously. ~~It is Kant who launched the first major analysis of "character" in the Western tradition world.~~ The first work on character is attributed to ~~XXXXXX~~ Theophrastus, the pupil of and successor

to Aristotle. The theme was revived by La Bruyère in the late seventeenth century. But it was Immanuel Kant ^{(who undertook the first major analysis of "character" in Western philosophy, and} who had the major impact on all subsequent writings on character. And for Kant, it is the analysis of character that provides him with the framework to account for the operation of both necessity and freedom in human conduct.

In his Critique of Pure Reason, Kant distinguishes between two kinds of character. An empirical character is located in the region of experience and is subject to the laws of causality. An intelligible character is the cause of actions as phenomena. It is therefore free and independent of necessary law. In the second part of his Anthropology, he makes yet another distinction, that between physical and moral character. The former, which comprehends man's natural disposition and temperament, tells us merely what nature has made of him. It is a man's given, over which he has exercised no control and for which he is, therefore, not responsible. The latter, moral character, is character in the proper sense. It is an interrelated whole, and implies that property of the will by which a man binds himself to certain modes of conduct ~~unchangeably~~ laid down for himself by his own reason. Moral ^{character} ~~quality~~ possesses the quality of stability and, to some extent, predictability, flowing from the freedom and self-activity of man. (This point should be emphasized and will be returned to later, in the second part of this chapter. Predictability normally implies the curbing of freedom, but it is here accepted as a token of freedom because the predictable reactions have been freely willed in advance.)

Centuries earlier, Maimonides had the following to say about human traits in that portion of his legal code, the Mishneh Torah ^① which deals with character: there are some traits that man is born with as part of his natural, intrinsic constitution; some to which he is more inclined or predisposed than others; and some which he has acquired for himself, either by exposing himself to the kind of environment where he would absorb them, or by appropriating them for himself by free and rational choice. The elements of Kant's physical and moral character -- and even an intermediate category --- are here prefigured, although there are, of course, ~~the~~ differences. Almost everything Maimonides has say on the subject requires the presupposition that man uses his evaluative faculties freely in deciding upon his conduct not only in particular situations and regarding individual reactions, but with regard to his whole character orientation as well. For both Maimonides and Kant, moral character is unthinkable without freedom.

Thus, a ~~the~~ theory of moral character must, without defining precise limits, assert the existence of some core of freedom in the human personality and defend it against ~~not only the~~ encroachment, ^{with} ~~but~~ obliteration, by the apostles of rigorous determinism who swear allegiance to the standard of Science.

At this point we must turn around ~~xxx~~ 180° to ~~defend~~ confront another group of determined opponents whose antagonism to

② Hil. Deiot, 1.2.

the concept of character ~~xxxxxxx~~ is the polar opposite of ~~scientific and psychological determinists~~.
the group previously discussed. The romanticists of the counter-culture go to such an extreme in cherishing freedom and spontaneity, that for them character, as an organized, systematic, and ^{at} interrelated mode of response, must be entirely abandoned as stifling, enslaving, and even hypocritical.

The disgust at duplicity, so widespread especially amongst those who identify with the counter-culture, is allied with a ruthless "honesty" which places a special valuation on the passionate and the impulsive. Any attempt to inhibit spontaneity and restrain raw energy is considered hypocritical and bourgeois. But that is precisely what character attempts to do. Character is the principled organization of energies and temperaments, of emotions and dispositions, and the deliberate disciplining of naked and unruly energies and passions.

This polarization of "character" and "honesty" -- in the sense of the unmodified expression of the spontaneous -- ^{goes} ~~goes~~ back ~~to~~ in our culture to the Renaissance and Enlightenment, but especially to Romanticism⁽²⁾. Wordsworth and Whitman and Hemingway are the direct forbears of the new Romanticismⁱ of our times, in which traditional character formation is considered a meaningless repetition of gestures that thwart spontaneity and distort the future by trammelling it. Only "honesty" is liberating. Whatever attempts to filter the primal impulse through reason or morality or whatever, is retrogressive and reactionary. Hence, to take one example,

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(2) *See "Honesty as a Policy," by John D. Sisk, American Scholar, Spring 1972.

the New Left, with the blessing of Marcuse, considers obscenity a liberating response to the establishment's efforts to curtail the honesty of personal expression. Character, according to this doctrine, is antispontaneous, antiutopian, ~~an~~ and dishonest^{or}, worse, antihonest.

Instead of pattern and predictability, the natural results of character formation, counter-culture spokesmen demand total commitment to change and impulse. Character is fixity, whereas liberated man must opt for flexibility. The "Consciousness III Man" is one who is dedicated to the flux, and it is this which endows him with honesty, wholeness, optimism, love, and a total openness to experience.

Undoubtedly, this approach is ~~ex~~ Dionysian and even orgiastic in its implications. There is no guarantee as to the nature of this spontaneity and the moral quality of this raw energy and unmediated impulse. The primal urge may sometimes be creative and liberating, But have not experience and history taught us that it can just as often (perhaps more often) be destructive and enslaving? Honesty is a fine thing, but it is good to remember that many a brutal and sadistic killer is also honest, spontaneous, and open to experience. Mussolini ^{genuinely believed in Fascism,} ~~made the trains~~ ^{in his hatred of Jews, Stalin was a true believer in Communism,} ~~run on time,~~ Hitler was sincere, and Charles Manson was honest, spontaneous, open to all kinds of experience, a charismatic figure who had liberated himself and his followers from the shackles of aprioristic value judgments and character structures. ^{And they were all unspeakable murderers.}

It is against such simplistic extremism that Judaism must

take its stand in favor of character and character formation, with its corrolary that certain options of behavior are excluded in the future. There is nothing in logic or nature or philosophy that should make us give greater value to the present^e than to the past. "Now" is idolatrous when it demands complete autonomy and a vitiation of all commitments made in the past. To deny as antihonest the right, the necessity, of men to bind themselves now for later, of before for now, is to make a mockery of civilization and to turn ~~x~~ all culture into a nihilistic chaos. Total predictability does indeed stifle freedom, but totla^e novelty stifles humanity.

The counter-culture has made its contribution in its emphasis on freedom, liberty, and the spontaneous as the source of creativity. But as Ogden Nash once observed, "O Liberty, how many liberties have been taken in thy name!" Flexibility without any fixity, change without structure, fluidity without pattern and something enduring, passion without principle, freedom without form, expression without character -- these, given a dash of charisma and intelligence by an influential scoundrel, ~~xxx~~ lead to widespread violence and destruction.

The very concept of moral character thus forces^{vs} to a position in which we agree with neither one nor the other of the prevailing attitudes towards freedom. In opposition to the scientific and especially the psychological determinists, we must assert an irreducible residuum of freedom. In opposition to the new romanticists^e and the cultists of spontaneity, we must insist that such freedom is not absolute.

It is worth turning to Maimonides again, as we shall have occasion to do in much greater detail in a later chapter, for it is he who offers the most challenging analytic view of character in the classical literature of Judaism. The essence of proper conduct is the free and responsible use of one's reason. The early sages taught us, he writes, "that a man should weigh his traits and evaluate them and direct them towards the mean (in between the two extremes that define every characteristic) in order to achieve perfection."³ It is the exercise of freedom in the formation of one's own patterns of conduct that is prerequisite to character. Yet the one-time decision alone is not enough. Character requires the repetition of correct decisions rationally arrived at. One must continually act in this mode and habituate himself to this pattern "until these acts become easy for him to perform, that he not experience difficulty in pursuing them, so that these traits become established in his soul."⁴ Out of freedom, man decides; but his decision is not for this moment only, ~~but~~ it directs and orients his future development and disposition. His reason, deciding in freedom, retains its hegemony over his spontaneous urges and impulses which flow freely from within the churning cauldron

³ * ~~Hil. Deiot, 1:4.~~

⁴ * ~~Ib., 1:7.~~

of the human heart.

As we shall see later, in chapter V, Maimonides recommends one form of character, which bears strong resemblance to the ideal developed in ~~xxxxx~~/Aristotelian characterology: the middle path, often called "The Golden Mean." But Maimonides' Jewish roots, his theistic bias, lead him to conclude that this is not the only mode of moral character. We still retain the right to choose from several competing models. And we must often reevaluate our developing character, and emphasize one trait above another ^{and stresses and distortions} for "therapeutic" reasons, in response to character structures, that are wholly personal and individual. Character, then, as Maimonides understood it, combines both freedom and commitment, choice and self-direction, flexibility and fixity. In this, Maimonides speaks for the whole Jewish tradition.

chapter II

Notes

1. Hil. Deiot 1:2.
2. See "Honesty as a Policy," by John P. Sisk,
American Scholar, spring 1972.
3. Hil. Deiot 1:4.
4. Ibid., 1:7.