

# On the Nature of Space, Dynamism, and Free Will

## Part 2 of 2

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We come now to a group of questions dealing with another subject matter. To introduce these, I shall quote the following paragraph from the letter:

There is another philosophical problem that is often of main interest to many of us. This is the problem of the free will. Do you agree with Sri Aurobindo that our present notion of free will is tainted with excessive egoism, and imagines freedom to be the capacity to act with complete independence, in isolation, without any determination other than its own choice? Yet, we have no nature with those characteristics. Our nature is part of the cosmos and subject to the supreme Transcendence. The only freedom to be attained is that which is gained by becoming the instrumentality of the Divine. Then one would not be subject to any determinism, because one would be united to the Source of all determination. Man's will becomes free when it is surrendered to Brahman's will?

I question whether there ever has been a question more baffling than that of determinism versus freedom. I think, however, that I can contribute some thoughts in this connection, which while I do not pretend that they solve the problem, but may have the value of giving a certain turn to the problem that may be conceivably helpful.

First of all, we have to distinguish two senses in which we speak of freedom, and these we might classify as the transcendental sense and, second, the pragmatic sense of freedom, namely, freedom in the empiric world to make choices that are real and not simply apparent. In the most fundamental sense, it is undoubtedly true that the real transcendental freedom is that which is achieved through yoga by becoming identical with that from which all law or determinism is derived. The Realization, the Fundamental Realization does give this sense of freedom, and here I stand in quite complete agreement with Sri Aurobindo. The Realization is liberating in this fundamental sense. There is thus no problem on this level. The question is, "Is there such a thing as a pragmatic or empiric freedom that gives to choice a real meaning and not merely an appearance which is resolved and that does become merely a hidden determinism after all?"

The formulation in the letter of an extreme independence where the individual is not determined by any external circumstance is not one that I have met and certainly it is not worthy of very serious consideration because the zones of determinism, both external and internal or subjective, are very obvious. For instance, we are not free of the law of gravity. We cannot act empirically as though the law of gravity did not exist. Any movement or any action whatsoever that we undertake must consider the presence of this

law. There are the determining factors of environment. There are the determining factors of the human law and its enforcement. This can be elaborated in considerable degree, but I think these instances are enough to illustrate the fact that there is an external determinism on the pragmatic or empiric level. There is also an inner determinism that grows out of the subjective side of our being. We have certain psychological factors which we cannot ignore. I need not elaborate upon this as I think this is quite clear, save to say that when we speak of doing as we please, it can be pointed out that we are conditioned by our pleasing, by our preferences, by our wishfulness, and this can be viewed as determining factors. It would be more truly an expression of empiric freedom to choose to go contrary to our preferences, especially where one goes contrary to his preferences without a counter-supporting reason. Thus, to affirm an absolute empiric freedom is not at all conceivable as a valid position. That is quite obvious. To say that man is in the empiric sense absolutely free or can attain an absolute freedom in this domain manifests simply a lack of real thoughtfulness. Such freedom is non-existent. But, there remains the question, "Is there any sense in which empirically or pragmatically we are free to choose?" And right here is a very crucial problem, for if there is no such thing as a free choice between alternatives in the empiric level, then there is no possibility of a real morality or ethics.

It should be clear that the issue here is not between the view of an absolute determinism in every possible sense so that the whole process of the universe and of the action of living creatures, including man, is conditioned in the same way that the operation of a clock or other similar mechanism is so conditioned. It should be clear that this is not the only alternative to a view that everything is unconditioned so that there is no determinism whatsoever; in other words that everything is indeterminant or contingent. The issue is between an absolute conditioning or a relative conditioning which permits real choice. And let me present the issue with a particular imagined case. Suppose I am seated before the elements that make up a meal—tasty in every way conceivable—and I feel the craving to eat and drink beyond the needs of the organism and do not stop the intake until I've reached the state of repletion. Certain consequences will follow from that in the course of time that are manifestly undesirable, producing a condition of suffering and a condition of reduced functioning. Having learned this through experience, I face the same situation and there is presented before me two elements, or two factors in determination: one is the uncontrolled craving, and on the other side there is the factor of rational judgment, which being based upon past experience proceeds to show reasons why the participation in the food and drink should be moderate in that it will lead to a greater enjoyment later and a greater capacity for functioning. I stand between these two factors: craving, on one side, and rational judgment, on the other. I decide to follow the course of rational judgment, and as a result deny my craving and eat and drink only moderately. Now, in taking this course, the determinists would say that the course of action is not free because reason and judgment are a form of determinism. I simply was determined by reason and judgment instead of by craving. But let us stop and think for a moment. There was a moment when I stood between two tendencies: one was to permit determination by craving, and the other was to permit or insist upon determination by reason and judgment. The course of action at that moment was indeterminant. Beyond that moment it may be very well determinant. I

am determined by reason and judgment in one case or by craving in the other case, but at the moment itself there would seem to have been a real decision.

There is something here that reminds me of Aurobindo's discussion of the source of our thoughts. He affirms that our thoughts are not created by ourselves, but that thoughts come to us; however, we do decide whether we will accept and entertain the thoughts or reject them. If we entertain the thoughts, then their logical development may very well be predetermined. It would be a case of determinism. But if we reject those particular thoughts, we do not then follow that course, but some other. There is a moment, then, of decision, of apparently real choosing. In that moment we would be responsible entities; after that moment we may be no longer simply responsible in the series of consequences that follow, but at that moment we were responsible.

In reflecting upon this problem, there developed in my mind three lines of argument which I have classified as follows: first, the psychological argument or the argument from immediacy; second, the scientific argument, the argument that is typically employed by the determinist; and third, the dialectical or what might be called the ontological argument. Let us consider these three in that order.

First, as to whether we are free, there is the immediate psychological fact that at the moment of decision, we *seem* to be free. This is an immediate state of consciousness. Of course, I'm well aware that the determinist tends to disparage this and regards it as a sort of deception. But let us consider the importance of the immediacy in other connections. It is by such psychological immediacy that we decide that there is an external environment around us consisting of the various objects such as trees, mountains, buildings, books, streams, valleys, and what not, and including all the various living creatures, ultimately involving, also, human beings. What reason have I to believe in the reality or the existence of these elements? Simply this, that they stand immediately before me. Let us take the case of our basic belief concerning the existence of human beings other than oneself. I am aware of other human beings, but using an argument that is analogous to that of the determinist in connection with the immediate feeling of freedom, I could say that is simply a delusion; that which seems to be another human being, or other human beings, before me, is merely a projection from my consciousness; that actually there is only one center of consciousness in this world, or in this universe, and that is myself, and all else is simply my system of perceptual ideas or images that come before me. That is the familiar argument that is known as solipsism. Now, if we have a determinist who is also a consistent solipsist, he is in a condition that is unassailable. We may say, as Schopenhauer did with respect to the solipsistic point of view, that it is a fort which we cannot take, that the solipsist is unassailable; and he then suggests that the way to handle that problem is simply to ignore it and go by the fort and go on with our chosen activities. Well, the consistent determinist who is also a consistent solipsist, we may say is in an unassailable position, but we may take the course that Schopenhauer suggested.

The second argument is that which I have called the scientific argument, and this seems to afford the basis for the most serious development of the theory of determinism. With the advent of Newton's *Principia*, it seemed to be very evident that all the events in nature were determined by law. The point of view introduced by Newton was subsequently developed in greater detail by a French scientist known as LaPlace, and he

was the source of the dictum that if one knew everything concerning the present state of nature, he could predict every future state of that nature including the history of every smallest particle as well as of every entity of a larger sort, living or mineral. That was the conception of law which held at that time and was the conception of physical law that held up close to the end of the nineteenth century when there came into the zone of physical knowledge certain facts which destroyed that whole view. I shall not elaborate upon these but refer directly to our present conception of physical law. It is not that which was presented by LaPlace, but rather a conception that physical laws do not determine in the specific sense of the course of action or state of being of every particle whatsoever, but rather that these laws are statistical. There are many facts in nature that have supported and made this point of view more or less inevitable today. As for instance, we know that radioactive material such as uranium and radium, and many others, have a tendency to degenerate; in other words, for the matter to break down in part to form other elements and in part to be dissipated as pure radiant energy. We cannot say that any particular atom of such radioactive material is going to disintegrate at any particular moment. All we can say is that each of these radioactive elements have a half-life of such and such length. As I remember it's something on the order of 1700 years in the case of radium, of about 2 billion years in the case of uranium, and in the case of some very short-lived byproducts in modern subatomic physical experiments, half-lives of only a minute fraction of a second. We know from the evidence, or reasonably well infer from the evidence, that half the material will have disappeared in the original form taken up in other forms of matter and in part dissipated as radiation. We cannot determine that a particular atom will participate in this disintegration at a specific moment. We can make judgments only concerning the mass of atoms that form our material body. This means that our conception is statistical; that we know what will happen concerning the mass, but not concerning the individual. It's like the thinking that is involved in insurance. It is known with a high order of reliability that in a population of a million human beings a certain proportion will die each year, but we cannot determine when the individual, any particular individual, will die. A reliable business can be built upon the basis of this calculation, and yet with respect to every individual there is a great uncertainty as to the moment of termination of life. Today our knowledge of physics is such that we have been forced, admittedly rather reluctantly, to the conclusion that basic physical laws are statistical, that we do not know that certain physical phenomena which are highly usual are inevitable. Now, from this basis of physical law, the determinist is cut away completely from his most formidable argument. We do not know concerning the individual. We have high certainty with respect to the mass of innumerable individuals. This implies, then, some consequences that are very interesting indeed. It suggests at once that there is both freedom and law, that uncertainty is part of physical process—real uncertainty—and yet, at the same time, that all is governed by a principle of law. I submit that our present state of physical knowledge is such that it no longer supports the argument of the determinist, but rather opens the door for that degree of uncertainty which leaves possible a real freedom—a real freedom of choice.

Now we come to the third argument, the one which I've called dialectical or ontological. This argument is based upon implications derived from the dualistic character of our empiric world. The question is not now before us as to whether dualism is an ultimate truth concerning the nature of reality. As a matter of fact, the force of the

Realizations which I have known confirm the non-dualistic position of Shankara, and my philosophy is in that sense akin to that of the *Advaita*. But this fact remains true, that the empiric world, the world of our normal experience, is dualistic; and there is very important ground for concluding that there cannot be any such thing as a manifestation or an evolution without the intervention of at least an instrumental dualism. Interpret it as much as we please as a *maya*, or illusion, nonetheless, for producing the type of experience which is external—which is in terms of a development of things, of objects, and so forth—dualism is an apparent necessity. Ultimate reality may well be, as I affirm it is, a monistic entity, an interconnectedness of all things into one ultimate whole.

But let us study the implications of our dualistic state of experience. We find that so far as our knowledge of this world is concerned, we can know anything, in the empiric sense, only by contrast to its contradictory, and most specifically, to its opposite. We know good only by contrast to evil; we know up only by contrast to down; we know right only by contrast to left; and so on through all of our cognition of substantives, of relatives, and of various actions. This is simply something that can be determined by simple analysis. Now, the question might arise as to whether this is a characteristic only of our cognition or, on the other hand, is a characteristic of the existential being in this field of duality. I shall not go into this particular problem at this time, for that does not now concern us, but we'll apply this principle to the problem of freedom versus determinism.

It is fundamental to the whole dualistic experience that we have here that neither pole of the dualism is true and that the other is necessarily false. Actually, the goodness that we know, which stands in contrast to evil, has an existence which is relative to that evil. If the evil were to vanish, so also would the good vanish. There is a state transcending this duality of good and evil which sometimes has been called a higher kind of good, thus introducing a new relativity in a dualistic form; but in that transformation to a higher state, which can be Realized in certain imperiences, the evil becomes something different from what it was before and so also does the good become something different from what it was before. The good and evil are thus equally real or equally unreal. Approached from either point of view we can have at least a relatively valid philosophy if we bear this point in mind, but if we affirm the good and deny the reality of the evil, we have become merely sentimental. We have lost the capacity for an authentic realistic view of the world in the dualistic sense, as it is. Bear this point in mind because this is fundamental to the argument for freedom. I need not go through all of the various dualisms that appear before us, anyone can make the analysis at his leisure, but let us go directly to the dualism of determinism and freedom. The implication is that the reality of determinism is no greater than the reality of freedom. We could not know freedom without determinism, and we could know determinism without freedom. It is because of freedom that we have the experience of restriction; for, an entity that was wholly determined in every respect would have no sense whatsoever of being restricted. Study this carefully, for this is the essence of the argument. We know that in the empiric sense we do have the freedom of choice because we do have the experience of restriction. This is more than an argument of presumption in favor of the existence of a pragmatic freedom; it really has the force of an authentic proof. Man is capable of choice, and therefore is a moral entity.

This concludes my answers to the questions.