
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

The Case for Determinism

To the Editor:

It pains me to take issue with Wayne Booth on anything at all, since we were both students at the University of Chicago in the glory days of Robert Maynard Hutchins, Richard McKeon, Ronald Crane, and Norman Maclean; and we were both part of that "elite generation" of World War II veterans who flooded the graduate schools after we were demobilized.

But Booth is a Platonist, and I am an Aristotelian. Perhaps for that reason I feel compelled to insist on distinctions that he glosses over in the first two paragraphs of his "Where Have I Been, and Where Are 'We' Now, in This Profession?" (109 [1994]: 941–50). He begins his retrospective by taking a slap at determinism, which he casually dismisses by saying that we don't have to "worry about any ultimate victory" for it because "determinists simply cannot finally win" (941).

But indeed they can "finally" win, as they always have won. The issue of determinism, however light-heartedly Booth dismisses it, is the most important question in the history of human thought. The arguments for it, which are complex and need to be followed carefully, are beyond the scope of this brief letter. To simplify, without determinism no knowledge of any kind would ever be possible, including the knowledge necessary just to conduct our day-to-day lives. Albert Einstein refused to be diverted from his conviction that the cosmos is not governed by a toss of the dice ("Gott würfelt nicht"). Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, as Einstein recognized but Niels Bohr did not, was an epistemological principle, not an ontological one. Even "chaos," physicists are now teaching us with the aid of fractal geometries, is not "chaotic" at all in the sense in which humanists use the words.

But the best demonstration of the ineluctability of determinism is still to be found in *Freedom of the Will* (1754), a magisterial work by a colonial American theologian, Jonathan Edwards. If Booth has not studied it, I commend it to him. For a more recent relevant book, he can turn to *Science and Moral Priority: Merging Mind, Brain, and Human Values* (1983), by the Nobel laureate Roger Sperry.

If determinism is valid, where does Booth get his belief that he has made a series of choices throughout his life, a belief I hold about my life, too? Of course, there were choices we obviously could not have made, and on this point I am

sure he would agree with me. He could not have chosen to bear a child, I as a woman could not have chosen to grow a beard, and neither of us could have chosen to be an eighteenth-century Chinese mandarin.

The unexamined assumption in Booth's narrative is that efficient causes are the only kind that exist, since they alone have survived since the beginning of modern science in the seventeenth century. But if Booth will turn to McKeon's introduction to *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, he will find a discussion of what was arguably Aristotle's greatest contribution to philosophy, the doctrine of multiple causation. Every event, Aristotle recognized, is determined not by one kind of cause but by four: material, efficient, formal, and final. Their collapse to efficient causation only is one of the most profound losses philosophy has suffered. But when we think in terms of all four of these causes for every event, we can understand why some choices are compatible with determinism.

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Reply:

M. E. Grenander's letter puzzles me a lot, starting with her flat label, "Platonist." The mentors she and I shared, Ronald Crane and Richard McKeon among others, persistently rejected labels like "Platonist" and "Aristotelian" and taught us all—I had thought—to work as pluralists. It was not just that different philosophies are useful in dealing with different questions, as in the old jest "If you want to find out *how* to get downtown, study Aristotle; if you want to decide *whether* to go downtown, study Plato." Our pluralism ran—and mine still runs—much deeper than that. No one philosophy covers, even in principle, all truth; we are forever destined to need more than any one philosophy. (In another version of pluralism, one that I don't embrace, each major philosophy "covers," *in principle*, all truth, and all major philosophies are thus inherently, ultimately reconcilable. In this pluralism, the major problem becomes: just who belongs on the list of "majors"?)

A label seeker reading different parts of my work might well come up with "Kenneth Burkeite" or "Ciceronian" or "Deweyite." At different times of day, as it were, I grant each of these, along with other masters, what Walter Watson calls, in his development of McKeon's pluralism, "reciprocal priority" (*The Architectonics of Meaning: Foundations of the New Pluralism*, 2nd ed. [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983]). Though "pluralist" can easily become just another label that doesn't help

much, and though it is easily and wrongly identified with simple relativism, at least it fuzzies up the other labels. In short, M. E. Grenander, if I'm a Platonist, you're another.

What her letter rightly dramatizes, however, is my folly in dismissing "determinism" in a paragraph, without bothering to define what I was dismissing. As she says, the subject is "beyond the scope" of brief treatment. When I claimed that "determinists simply cannot finally win," I had in mind some of the reductionists she herself rightly wants to shoot down. In this we both follow Aristotle in his development of formal and final causes in order to show the limitations of earlier reductions to efficient or material causes: to atoms bouncing along in love or combat; to this or that physical element or process. To me the continuing survival of "obviously" indefensible reductions is astonishing—and fully as deplorable as she claims. One kind, that of the "physicalists" or "physical particle-ists," does seem increasingly in retreat, even among physicists, but I have a colleague who still claims to believe that all future events, including answers to his claim, could be predicted by any god who was aware of every bump now occurring among those billiard balls (for a more sophisticated version of this reduction, see David Papineau, *Philosophical Naturalism* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994]). More popular these days are what I call the "biologismists," those biologists who believe that everything we do is reducible to the genes: "selfish genes" trying to survive; "altruism genes" making us generous; "fat genes," "homosexual genes," and so on (for a systematic critique of gene reduction, see R. C. Lewontin et al., *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature* [New York: Pantheon, 1984], or the justified flood of attacks, most of them carefully argued, on *The Bell Curve*, by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray [New York: Free, 1994]—e.g., Stephen Jay Gould, "Curveball," *New Yorker* 28 Nov. 1994: 139–49). One could fill a book with other reductionists: "economismists," who believe that everything we do can be explained by market forces; or the "artificial intelligentsia"—Mary Midgley's clever label—who think that AI can explain everything. (Midgley's life-work provides a witty and learned refutation of most reductive determinisms, including the absurdities of psychological reductions like behaviorism; see her most recent book, *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom and Morality* [London: Routledge, 1994]).

In other words, in dismissing "determinism" I thought I was defending what Grenander defends as she reminds us of Aristotle's multiple causes, and especially the final cause, choice or purpose. The word somehow threw her off, so that she saw me as rejecting, as I do not, the belief that all events have causes—of *some* kind.