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**Brand Blanshard on Determinism,  
The Absolute, and Infinite Predictability**

**Blanshard and Behaviorism**

Brand Blanshard, one of America's most articulate and perceptive defenders of determinism, is also one of the strongest critics of both Watson's behaviorism and Skinner's more sophisticated behaviorism. At a meeting of the American Philosophical Society that happened to be on the four-hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, Blanshard publicly asked Skinner if, on his view, Shakespeare's mind made any difference to what the great playwright wrote down on paper. By Shakespeare's mind, Blanshard meant such ingredients as ideas, desires, and purposes. Blanshard understood Skinner to answer that Shakespeare's mind was no factor at all in the writing of *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and the other dramas bearing the Bard's name. Even though both Blanshard and Skinner are acknowledged determinists, they appear to be worlds apart in their views of consciousness. Metaphysically, Skinner is an empiricist and a physicalist of some sort. Blanshard calls himself an absolutist and a rationalist. The first point I wish to make is that the subtlety of Blanshard's determinism cannot be appreciated if tied to materialism or physicalism. Indeed, the subtlety of Skinner's determinism cannot be grasped if reduced to Watsonian materialism (Blanshard 1980a: 140).

**Causal Conditioning**

In *Reason and Analysis*, Blanshard states his determinism quite succinctly:

If the selves out of which actions emerge are not causally conditioned, if states of the self may suddenly appear which are connected by no law at all with the past interests or habits, the character or education, of the agent, then human behavior becomes not only inexplicable in principle, but, so far, impossible to influence by discipline or instruction. This may indeed be the case, but it seems to me increasingly impossible as our knowledge of human nature grows. (Blanshard 1962: 492)

In trying to understand Blanshard's determinism, we must not make the mistake of assuming that causality is all of one type or on one level only. The pulling about of puppets in a Punch-and-Judy show is only one of many types of causality. Blanshard insists that one's conclusions and moral choices cannot be reduced to their being the product of nothing but clockwork. They are determined, Blanshard insists, but they are not mechanically determined.

### Necessity and Responsibility

The Attorney Clarence Darrow gained a certain fame in part by making powerful claims that some of his clients had in effect been causally conditioned to behave in illegal and sometimes violent ways. He graphically portrayed excerpts from their youth that presumably conditioned them to become less than law-abiding citizens. Blanshard, far from denying that various kinds of causal ingredients have conditioned the individual to be what he is, says plainly, "What is caused, we hold, is necessitated." In other words, every causal connection is a logical one. Instead of being mere conjunction, causality is necessary connection. Nothing is merely contingent. Everything in the universe is connected necessarily with everything else. To be sure, this general conclusion, applying to everything equally, tells us next to nothing distinctive about anything. In his chapter "Intimations of Cosmic Necessity," Blanshard resists the conclusion that human agents are fate's pawns void of moral freedom. Indeed, in apparent opposition to Darrow's use of the doctrine of necessity, Blanshard contends that he is perfectly consistent in insisting that we hold the violator of the law "responsible in the sense that one may justly punish him in the interest of reform or deterrence. . ." (Blanshard 1962: 489 - 492).

### Determinism and Freedom

The personalistic idealist Peter Bertocci argues that if determinism were true, "the very possibility of a moral or immoral life vanishes; moral development becomes a meaningless process." Bertocci stresses the importance of *effort* and of *trying* to alter one's behavior.

We do not praise him simply so that he will be influenced to be better. We praise him because we think that he has already chosen a path which was not *forced* on him, and because we believe that he will be able to make our praise help him in the future. We as a part of his environment

influence him, but we do so because he is *willing* to let praise help him. (Bertocci 1953: 232f.; italics added)

Against indeterminists like Bertocci, Blanshard insists that without determinism, morality and moral education would be impossible. We may ask, How can these two philosophers arrive at such diametrically opposite conclusions? To complicate matters, while Blanshard denies the existence of free will (in the sense of a portion of reality that slips through the net of necessary connections), he affirms the existence of human freedom and insists that such freedom presupposes determinism (Blanshard 1962: 492f.).

Bertocci counters that we do not say that a given act is right (or wrong) if we think no other act could have resulted. We do not say that a match does what is right when it burns the paper, for we know that given the proper conditions no other effect is ever produced (Bertocci 1953: 233).

### Freedom and Force

Bertocci insists that freedom of choice means we are not forced to take one of the options. Is it accurate, then, to say that Blanshard's determinism means that all our choices are forced upon us? This is not an easy question to answer, for the determinists' doctrine of necessity does seem to presuppose that every human choice is actually forced on us.

Indeterminists strongly insist that in the search for truth, we must remain free to make the quest. If we are controlled by our prejudices, desires and passions, we will likely make little progress in the quest. In short, the search for truth presupposes a certain ability to *willfully* resist improper influences, forces, and distractions.

On the other hand, does not the search for truth presuppose that we are not free to *willfully* reject the better explanations and theories? Do we not sometimes say we were *forced* or *compelled* to arrive at one conclusion rather than others? In "Mental Causes," C. H. Whiteley contends that only irrational people believe what they choose to believe. Rational people "want to have their beliefs imposed upon them in accordance with the evidence and the principles of logic." Indeed, we are more prone to think we are compelled to accept a conclusion when the reasons are very clear and the conclusion unpalatable (Whiteley 1968: 105).

Perhaps a bridge of a sort can be built between determinists and indeterminists. But for this to happen, each must admit that *force* is at play in all our actions and choices. Skinner is getting at this insight when he speaks at length of our being under the *control* of the contingencies of reinforcement.

The point I wish now to develop, however, is that force or control is not all of one type. What would compel a mare to run – or reinforce her running – might prove insulting to a human being.

### Kinds of Force

A gun in our ribs can force us to hand over our wallets. We actually have a choice of either handing over our wallets or suffering dire consequences. To be sure, we would prefer a wider range of options; but the point is that in this choice, force is at play. If we choose to be shot or knocked in the head, someone might legitimately ask what made or caused us to choose (consciously or unconsciously) to be assaulted rather than to hand over our wallets.

A gun in our ribs cannot, however, cause us to genuinely *believe* that our gun-wielding assailant is, for example, a buffalo. The gun might compel us to *say* that he is a buffalo or to *say* any of a number of things we do not sincerely believe. But a gun is not the *type* of force that can directly bring about certain sincere beliefs or intellectual conclusions. Guns can however create an environment in which open inquiry is severely limited. Saudi Arabia provides an example of such a closed environment.

The freedom to be rational or to think objectively implies being free from certain kinds of force, threat, or intimidation. Unless checked, some of our own desires, passions, and emotions can become so forceful as to rob us of our ability to think clearly in certain areas of our lives. Thinking rationally, then, requires a measure of freedom *from* these psychological forces.

At the same time, however, determinists like Blanshard are probably correct in implying that rational thinking cannot come about unless we come under the control or force of sound arguments, calm reflection, and the relevant information. He writes:

When a thinker follows a line of implication, the course of his thought is conditioned by the necessity in his subject matter, but far from being humiliated when he realizes this, he finds in it a ground of pride. For a rational being to act under the influence of seen necessity is to place himself at the farthest possible extreme from the behavior of the puppet. For a moral agent to choose that good which in the light of reflection approves itself as intrinsically greatest is to exercise the only freedom worth having. In such cases the line of determination runs through the agent's own

intelligence. To think at its best is to find oneself carried down the current of necessity. To choose most responsibly is to see alternative goods with full clearness and to find the greatest of them tipping the beam. This, in a way, is to be determined. But there is nothing mechanical about it. For it is what the rational man means by freedom. (Blanshard 1962: 493)

### Creativity and Determinism

Karl Popper suggests that the problem of human freedom is more fruitfully explored in connection with the creation of music or of new scientific theories or technical inventions than with ethics or ethical responsibility (Popper 1972: 233, #38). Blanshard, however, thinks the whole notion of creativity is sunk hip-deep in confusion. He doubts that the universe contains a “. . . principle of novelty” that is “. . . some power or drive in nature that resists law and necessity” (Blanshard 1980c: 668). Nevertheless, he does recognize that as a metaphysical monist he must somehow reckon with the relation of the actual to the possible, which is the territory in which creativity happens. Unlike F.H. Bradley, Blanshard does not surrender to mysticism by pronouncing all relations as mere appearances (Blanshard 1980d: 898). On the one hand, Blanshard accepts novelty as a fact. On the other hand, he denies any contingency in nature. Indeed, he makes the following astonishing comment:

Charles Hartshorne, with all his encyclopedic knowledge of birdcalls, was in 1600 [C.E.] a future possibility with its causal foundations already actually laid. A mind sufficiently powerful—that of the traditional Christian God, for example—could have foreseen him in detail. (Blanshard 1980b: 642)

To be sure, Blanshard denies that such an omniscient mind exists, but his point is that every detail of the future will emerge *of necessity* from its antecedent causes. This is another way of saying that everything that happens does so with strict inevitability. Opaqueness in events does not come from “caprice in nature” but is mere testimony to “our own invincible ignorance” (Blanshard 1980c: 668).

It seems to me that Blanshard's arguments lead to the conclusion that every detail of Charles Hartshorne's rich life was predictable with infinite precision in the time of the pharaohs. Indeed, Blanshard's position

implies that Hartshorne's life in every detail was in principle predictable even when the universe did not contain the actual planet Earth. By the same token, Shakespeare's *King Lear* existed in some sense already in the universe billions of years ago. But is this not in contradiction with Blanshard's view that Shakespeare's plays emerged only because the great Bard entertained many ideas *before* he wrote down the words on paper? Blanshard perhaps escapes self-contradiction only by embracing the theory that Shakespeare and all his ideas also existed or subsisted in some sense in the universe billions of years ago, some of his preexisting ideas coming *before* the preexisting plays. Popper gives the name "preformationism" to the view that all the possibilities which have realized themselves in the course of time and evolution must have been, potentially, preformed, or pre-established, from the beginning (Popper and Eccles 1995: 15; 23). Popper's criticism appears to me devastating, and Blanshard seems to have anticipated it somewhat but has no convincing defense against it.

#### Determinism and the Problem of Time

Blanshard is quite alert to the charge that his monism and rationalism reduce time and therefore change to illusions. According to the charge, time becomes swallowed up in the Absolute, which is not an all-inclusive mind but, for Blanshard, the all-inclusive system in which all facts and events are necessarily connected. Smarting under this charge, Blanshard asks, "But *need* a rationalist deny the reality of time?" He answers that causation itself is a *temporal* process governed by laws "necessary laws connecting the nature of the cause with that of the effect" (Blanshard 1980c: 672). Unfortunately, Blanshard never makes clear how time flows in the realm of subsisting realities or virtual realities.

#### Universal Causality without Infinite Predictability

Karl Popper is a relative indeterminist. He does not deny that every event is caused, but he does deny that every event in the distant future is predictable with any desired degree of precision. With Blanshard, he holds that reasons, arguments, abstract rules, and information can have a causal impact on both mind and body (Popper 1972: 220 - 225). Without embracing Blanshard's determinism, he acknowledges that "to say that the black marks made on white paper which I produced in preparation for this lecture were just the result of chance is hardly more satisfactory than to say that they were physically predetermined. In fact, it is even less satisfactory" (Popper 1972: 227).

Whereas Blanshard stresses the law of necessity, Charles Hartshorne contends that human freedom requires both indeterminism and universal causality, which is roughly Popper's position, too. According to Hartshorne, law is exhibited as a limitation upon chance, not its absence. This, he believes, gives creativity a pervasive role. The usual minimal claim of determinism is that every event in all details is unambiguously specified by its conditions and the causal laws. Hartshorne thinks he can resolve the problem of creativity in a world of universal causality by insisting that temporal succession is quite different from unqualified logical implication. At the same time, "there is implication. Something like what happens next was bound to happen – so far, there is 'necessary connection' but the precise particulars just do happen, quite without necessity or implication." This is, Hartshorne holds, "relative determinism," which is the same as "relative indeterminism" (Hartshorne 1962: 162, 174; 179f.).

#### Free Will and Omniscience

For decades, Hartshorne has exposed the flaws in the theory of God as omnipotent. He has contended forcefully that omnipotence and human free will are incompatible (Hartshorne 1984). Yet, he insists that God's knowledge is infallible. "God, as infallible, has absolutely conclusive evidence concerning all truths, so that if knowledge is possession of perfect evidence as to the state of affairs, then God simply knows – period" (Hartshorne 1962: 141). Ironically, Hartshorne does not see that his own brilliant criticism of determinism and his defense of real novelty in the universe render perfect evidence and divine infallibility an impossibility. Given the objective reality of free will, novelty, and chance – all so central to Hartshorne's process philosophy – no mind, divine or human, can infallibly predict the relatively indeterminate future. Yet Hartshorne's God has the responsibility to venture predictions even though some of the predictions will surely be falsified. Hartshorne cannot have his cake and eat it, too. In cutting the ground out from under Blanshard's determinism, he renders his own God not only without omnipotence but also without omniscience.

#### The Problem of Divine Free Will

Some of the puritan Calvinists as well as the twentieth century Calvinist Gordon Clark have understood that a God who is absolutely omniscient and omnipotent cannot have free will. "Free will," Gordon Clark

contends, "means there is no determining factor operating on the will . . ." Free will means causeless choice. According to Calvinist Clark, Judas could not have chosen a path other than the one he took (Clark 1961: 201f.; 227). The same goes for Clark's God, who created "the only possible world – a Calvinistic twist to a Spinozistic phrase" (Clark 1961: 189). In other words, the universe and every detail in it was and is the *inevitable* flow from the Creator's nature. There could not have been a world other than the one that exists. Clark's God did not have free will. He does, however, enjoy freedom, but only in the sense that he creates only what he wants to create. He did not, however, create his wants (Clark 1961: 227). Choice and necessity are therefore compatible since even the divine choice is itself determined by the divine nature. "A choice," says Clark, "is still a deliberate volition even if it could not have been different" (Clark 1961: 229). This is precisely what Hartshorne and Bertocci deny. For Clark, God has no free will, since "consciousness of free will is simply the unconsciousness of determination." But the Calvinistic God is presumably fully conscious (omniscient) of all his uncreated determinations. (Clark 1961: 229).

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