

PHILOSOPHICAL LECTURE

SELF-CREATION

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WHEN we hear of some new scientific technique for modifying and controlling human behaviour, few of us feel unmixed enthusiasm. Some sources of our unease are obvious. We know how the political or military authorities in various countries have used conditioning techniques, sensory deprivation, and psychiatric drugs, and we are not eager to give them further means of control. But scarcely less obvious is the *Brave New World* objection: we resist handing over control of our lives even to benevolent authorities. In the case of *Brave New World*, our resistance is partly linked to specific features of that society: the uniformity, and the shallowness of the available activities and pleasures. But these are not our deepest objections. Our resistance to a benevolent controller may persist even if he persuades us that those controlled by him have varied lives involving complex and deeply satisfying activities.

We have a further layer of objections. When we hand over to a benevolent controller, can we trust his judgement about what we shall find satisfying? Can we be sure his technology never slips up? Can we rely on his continued benevolence? And, if these objections could be met, we might still resist the inequality of the proposal. Who is *he* to have such power over us?

So far, the points mentioned are familiar objections to dictatorships and other arrangements where power over many is concentrated in the hands of a few. But our resistance to psychological technology of control goes deeper. Imagine a machine which alters desires (and so behaviour) by sending signals which act directly on specific sites in the brain. Suppose that the members of a community could all hand over control of their desires and behaviour to this machine. And assume that it has an excellent grasp of their psychology, and that there is no serious danger of its going wrong. (Let us take a generous view of empirically implausible assumptions in philosophical thought-experiments.)

The members of the community program the machine themselves. Suppose they unanimously agree to program it to modify their desires where this will increase happiness. They will then voluntarily submit to the machine's control. They will expect that love will usually be mutual, that they will want to do the kind of work that is available and for which their talents are suited, and that conflicts between people will be rare. I have assumed a community of utilitarians, who program the machine to maximize the satisfaction of desires. But the program could reflect other values. It could give priority to 'higher' activities, or to increasing human variety. It could incorporate some principle giving weight to how happiness is distributed rather than merely maximizing the total, and so on.

Voluntary submission to a technically perfect and democratically programmed machine is not open to the objections mentioned so far. There need be no uniformity, nor any trivialization of what people do. Technological blunders are ruled out. And there is no inequality between controllers and controlled. Yet many of us would still not wish to join such a community. In part we may be deterred by the irreversibility of the step. Anyone with control over our desires can stop us ever wanting to eliminate his power. And this applies equally to the democratically programmed machine. But, if we could rely on life being so much improved, why should irreversibility worry us?

The deepest objection to giving up control over our own lives seems detachable from questions about the style of life involved. In this respect we can program the machine to reflect whatever values we have. Our concern to be in control of our lives is not only a matter of being able to do what we want: the machine can allow this. It is not just a matter of the kinds of desires we have: we can program machines to reflect our views on this. It seems that we resist the idea of our desires (and hence our character) being passively received from some external source. At least part of this resistance is that we care about our own active participation in the process of becoming one sort of person rather than another. I may know that in twenty years time I shall be a very different person, with a different outlook from my present one. But this is relatively undisturbing so long as the outcome reflects the choices I make in the intervening period: where each choice is made in the light of the values I have at that stage. I do not much mind becoming a different kind of person, but it does matter that I get there from here, at least partly under my own control.

For some of us, buried under the more obvious objections to

behaviour control, is the value we place on the project of self-creation. We have (perhaps changing) views about what sorts of people we should like to be, and we each want our own development to be continuously influenced by these views. As neurobiologists and psychologists develop more sophisticated techniques of control, which may not be open to some of the other objections, it becomes important that this value is brought more sharply into focus. The idea of self-creation obviously raises many philosophical problems. We need a less blurred view of what it comes to. And we need to see whether it can survive familiar scepticism about the possibility of freedom of choice. And, if we are to resist some of the proposed uses of behaviour control, we need to have some reply to another claim: that as our behaviour now may well be causally determined, in part by social pressures, we cannot rationally object to techniques which are only more explicit and effective versions of what we have already.

## I

### 1. *The Project of Self-Creation*

Talk of the 'self' has some unfortunate associations. It may suggest the disembodied Cartesian ego, or the unknowable Kantian 'noumenal self'. These obscure non-empirical entities, notable for their lack of explanatory power, have nothing to do with self-creation as understood here.<sup>1</sup>

Self-creation here is an empirical process, in which a person's present attitudes and values help to shape and control his present and future characteristics. He may want to become less shy, to be braver, more independent, or more tolerant. These aims involve no commitment to Cartesian or Kantian metaphysics.

The project of self-creation needs disentangling, not only from metaphysics, but also from some exaggerations. To say that people, or some people, have a project of self-creation is not to say it is the most important thing in their lives. It is possible to care

<sup>1</sup> Nor is self-creation proposed here as any kind of solution to problems of interpreting 'I' sentences. Robert Nozick (*Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford, 1981), p. 91), discussing those issues, uses the idea of 'self-synthesis' as part of his proposed solution. Having asked the very Kantian question, 'How is reflexive self-knowledge possible?', he gives an answer which, in style at least, is also satisfyingly Kantian: 'The self which is reflexively referred to is synthesized in that very act of reflexive self-reference. Reflexive reference from the inside corresponds to and reflects the reflexive synthesizing of the self (as synthesizing itself).' 'Self-synthesis' sounds an altogether more elaborate achievement than 'self-creation'.

about what sort of person you are becoming, but to think other considerations matter more. ('This job is deadening my imagination, but the alternative is unemployment.') And, to have a project of self-creation need not be to think of it much. We may spend most of the time immersed in daily living: going to work, helping the children with homework, planning a holiday. There is something absurd, as well as egocentric, about having 'my project of self-creation' at the forefront of consciousness.

Nor need self-creation be given any kind of moral priority over other considerations. There is a well-known discussion by Bernard Williams of 'integrity'. He gives moral dilemmas where disastrous consequences will be minimized by my doing something which I find deeply repugnant: where, say, if I do not kill one person, a larger number of people will be killed by someone else.<sup>1</sup> In such a dilemma, the aim of keeping the harm done to a minimum conflicts with (among other things) my concern not to be the sort of person who murders people. The only point to be made about this complex issue here is that having a project of self-creation need involve no commitment to the view that, in such a case, this project is more important than keeping loss of life as small as possible.

Another exaggeration is to suppose that the project of self-creation has to involve a 'life plan': a unitary blueprint of how your life is supposed to turn out. A few people have lives controlled by such an overall plan. But for most of us the project of self-creation is probably a fairly disorganized cluster of shifting sub-projects: more like building a medieval town than a planned garden city.

We need not overrate our powers of self-creation. In the first place, there are logical limits to the project.<sup>2</sup> It is self-defeating to aim directly at being more spontaneous or less self-conscious. These aims can be realized, if at all, only by oblique strategies. And with other states, while we can aim directly at them, awareness of successfully doing so is destabilizing. One case is the religious problem about knowing that you are really humble.

There are also severe empirical limits to our powers. Some philosophers have talked as though our characteristics, or at least our psychological characteristics, were entirely under our

<sup>1</sup> 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism, For and Against* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 93-100.

<sup>2</sup> This topic is well explored by Jon Elster, in *Sour Grapes* (Cambridge, 1983), ch. 2.

control.<sup>1</sup> No doubt we sometimes deceive ourselves: treating characteristics, which could with some effort be changed, as unalterable facts independent of our will. (People are rightly suspicious when someone complacently says, 'I just am a lazy person.') But it is surely absurd to suppose that all our psychological characteristics can be altered substantially and at will, or even that more than a few can be entirely so altered. Anyone inclined towards such beliefs should talk to people who seek help in changing themselves from psychoanalysts or behaviour therapists. The view that any apparent rigidity in our own psychological characteristics is a mere illusion is hardly more plausible than the same claim made by Christian Scientists about physical illness.

On the other hand, not all self-creation involves strenuous efforts of will. It can be a matter of endorsing and encouraging tendencies that are already natural to us. William James, in a letter to his wife, said: 'A man's character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: "This is the real me!"'<sup>2</sup> In such a moment we may be endorsing something which has cost us no effort to produce, but with which we feel an immediate affinity. (I have heard that Picasso, when asked to sign paintings thought to be his, would sign if he liked the painting, even if unsure that it was his work.)

The project of self-creation need not require either strenuous effort or the instant malleability of our whole character. It is a platitude that, for most people, some traits are virtually unalterable, and that some others can be altered only by drastic changes in way of life, or by effort over time. This partly recalcitrant reality is all that is needed. Self-creation is not like the instantaneous transformations of magic, but more like sculpting a piece of wood, respecting the constraints of natural shape and grain.

<sup>1</sup> Sartre, in his early writings, for example. But later he came to think differently. In an interview in 1969 he said: 'Then, little by little, I found that the world was more complicated than this, for during the Resistance there appeared to be a possibility of free decision. . . . The other day I re-read a prefatory note of mine to a collection of these plays—*Les Mouches*, *Huis Clos* and others—and was truly scandalized. I had written: "Whatever the circumstances, and wherever the site, a man is always free to choose to be a traitor or not . . ." When I read this, I said to myself: it's incredible, I actually believed that!'—'The Itinerary of a Thought', in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (London, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (London, 1968), p. 19.

2. *Self-creation and the Emotions*

It hardly needs saying that the emotions play a central role. Self-creation is entangled with our emotional life at many points, and can scarcely be understood outside that context. And, on the other hand, some emotional responses are impediments to our project.

Most obviously, becoming a certain sort of person may involve cultivating some emotional responses rather than others. (We may want to have wider sympathies, or to be less prone to guilt.) And self-creative projects involve some harmonizing of responses over time, except in the limiting case where the project itself is to be an unpredictable emotional firework display. Also, our reflective emotional responses are a kind of feedback influencing the aims of the project. We regret having acted in a certain way; we are cheered up by some success; we are embarrassed by our gauche-ness. These responses influence our picture of how we want to be.

And we are not usually evolving in social isolation. Relationships with others occupy much of the foreground in our picture of ourselves, and these relationships are often emotionally charged. But emotions are also more obliquely relevant here. The emotional 'chemistry' of different people (perhaps based on their actual chemistry) influences whether they are drawn together or pushed apart. We pass thousands of people without making contact, but there is mutual recognition when we come across people of our own or of a related kind, reminiscent of the selective adhesiveness of cells during embryonic development.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine a drug, or a kind of brain surgery, which dried up the emotional life, while not eliminating all desires to do things. For a person in this state, a project of self-creation could perhaps still exist in attenuated form. He might want to be a more efficient administrator, to be a millionaire, or to be a leading figure in the poultry world. These might be purely instrumental projects: being a more efficient administrator will save time. Or they might be non-instrumental projects of a rather dry and austere kind: you want success in the poultry world for its own sake, but have no

<sup>1</sup> The surfaces of cells only adhere to those of other cells of certain types, such as kidney cells to other kidney cells. And, within the development of an organ such as the eye, cells of, for instance, the retinal pigment layer are selectively adhesive relative to other eye cells.

'Obviously, both early and advanced tissues have capacities for selective adhesion. By this means they can distinguish not only their own kind but have the additional talent of recognizing some of the other tissues with which they must normally associate.' J. P. Trinkhaus, *Cells Into Organs, The Forces that Shape the Embryo* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1969), p. 103.

feelings of pride or delight when your chickens are known far and wide. Whether or not these limited desires make much sense out of the context of our general emotional life, it is clear that, without emotions, we have lost at least a central dimension of self-creation. Our project cannot include developing some emotions rather than others. Nor can it be shaped by present emotions. And many kinds of relationships are closed to us. Emotional dryness at best allows only parched and stunted growth.

But our emotional states, while needed for it, sometimes hinder self-creation. We understand Spinoza well when he says, 'Human infirmity in moderating and checking the emotions I name bondage: for when a man is prey to his emotions, he is not his own master but lies at the mercy of fortune.'<sup>1</sup> A father, driving along the motorway, whose children in the back of the car have a prolonged bout of quarrelling, may be unable to persuade them to stop. He may have a picture of what his parental role should be ('calm persuasion by reasons, willingness to listen sympathetically to the children's replies', etc.) which is rudely disrupted by his own sudden outburst of exasperation and anger.

For Spinoza, our slavery to emotional responses of this kind consists in the fact that they are not the free creations of our own mind, but are passively received from outside. 'Human infirmity and inconstancy' consists in lurching from one to another of these states. Spinoza does not explicitly discuss the idea of self-creation, but his suggested programme of liberation from servitude to these emotions is a self-creative project, and relevant to any such project liable to emotional disruption.<sup>2</sup>

The proposed way of liberation depends on the point (familiar in twentieth-century philosophy of mind) that emotions are not merely introspectible feelings, akin to sensations. Many emotions, unlike sensations, are belief-dependent, and so can be justified or unjustified. For Spinoza, the emotions that enslave us depend on 'inadequate ideas': beliefs that are false, confused, or incomplete. Reason, by undermining or correcting the beliefs, can liberate us from those emotions: 'That which constitutes the reality of love or hatred, is pleasure or pain, accompanied by the idea of an external cause; wherefore, when this cause is removed, the reality of love or hatred is removed with it; therefore these emotions and those which arise therefrom are destroyed.'<sup>3</sup> And part of the correction

<sup>1</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, pt. iv, Preface.

<sup>2</sup> My interest in this was stimulated by Stuart Hampshire, 'Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> *Ethics*, pt. v, Proposition IV, proof.

of inadequate ideas of the external causes of our emotions is to see other people who behave badly to us as themselves part of a determinist world: 'If we remember that complete acquiescence is the result of the right way of life, and that men, no less than everything else, act by the necessity of their nature: in such a case I say the wrong, or the hatred, which commonly arises therefrom will engross a very small part of our imagination. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

This programme of Spinoza's has great appeal. Some states (envy, resentment, jealousy, guilt, certain kinds of anger) are demeaning and consume our emotional energies. The ideal of freedom from such emotions is enormously attractive, and they are a hindrance to projects of self-creation.

But there are problems with this line of thought. In the first place, even if we accept that these emotions are based on false or inadequate beliefs, there are doubts about the effectiveness of the strategy. May not the most troublesome aspects of our emotional states survive rational criticism of the associated beliefs? Some moods of anxiety, depression, or irritability are free-floating, having an existence prior to any object chosen as the focus for any rationalizing beliefs. Even emotions with clear objects can be recalcitrant. A fear of heights, or a horror of spiders, may coexist with a full intellectual awareness that these responses are not rational. And, when the behaviour of particular people is the object of the unwanted emotion, thoughts that apply equally to anyone may be an inadequate remedy. The father exasperated by his children squabbling in the car may find he shouts at them even after rehearsing to himself considerations about universal determinism.

There are also obscurities in the Spinozist ideal. We are said to be slaves to those emotions we experience passively, and not to those in whose creation we actively participate. This suffers from the unclarity of the active-passive distinction. For Spinoza, we are active when something takes place of which we are 'the adequate cause', which he explains as 'when through our nature something takes place within us or externally to us, which can through our nature alone be clearly and distinctly understood'.<sup>2</sup>

Passivity occurs when we do something of which we are 'only the partial cause'. If the requirement for activity is that no circumstances external to the agent were necessary conditions for his performing the act, the standard is implausibly high. We can make more sense of activity and passivity by thinking in terms of a continuum instead of a sharp boundary. At one extreme are

<sup>1</sup> *Ethics*, pt. v, Proposition X, note.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. iii, Definition II.

emotions we have cultivated, while at the other extreme are sudden eruptions of unwanted emotions that seem to come from 'outside' us. But, if this is the way we should understand the distinction, a Humean doubt arises as to whether we could have any emotional life without at least some passive emotions. Is not the cultivation of some emotions likely to be motivated by other emotional responses? If so, the process will have started at some point with uncultivated, or 'passive' emotions. And the ideal of having only cultivated emotions seems to require a preference for regimentation, for turning wilderness into emotional suburban garden.

A further doubt concerns how far Spinoza's approach leaves room for any emotions at all with people as their objects. There are two conflicting possible Spinozist pictures of the desirable emotional life. The first is the ideal of global detachment. Seeing people in a determinist perspective, we see their activities as merely part of the unfolding of the universe, and so may come to regard all emotional responses to individuals as unjustified. (Spinoza at one point suggests that when emotions are associated with true thoughts, love, as well as hatred, will be destroyed.)<sup>1</sup> Global detachment leaves us with an exalted but austere emotional life: the Spinoza-Einstein intellectual love of the harmonious universe of which we are part. Although inspiring, such a transformation may alarm us. It will leave us an emotional life with no light and shade.

This thought may incline us towards the alternative ideal, of selective detachment. On this approach, we need to distinguish between desirable and undesirable emotions, cultivating or eliminating them accordingly. This is clearly a large part of Spinoza's official programme. He says, for instance, that mirth is always good, while hatred can never be good. (He says of love and desire only that they 'may be excessive'.) But the problem with this ideal is how far the class of undesirable emotions overlaps with the class of those which, being irrational, can be undermined. Why should we suppose that a case-by-case examination will show that admiration and gratitude are often well founded, while envy and resentment are always based on false or confused beliefs? And, if selective detachment does not result from examining particular cases, but on a general appeal to determinism, this may prove too much. If the proper object of resentment is not the man who lied when selling me a disastrous car, but the universe of which he is a part, will not the universe turn out also to be the only proper object of our admiration and gratitude?

<sup>1</sup> *Ethics*, pt. v, Proposition IV, note.

## II

3. *Determinism*

On the determinist view of the world, all events, including human actions, are the product of causal laws. Determinists impressed by modern physics often exempt events at the sub-atomic level, but argue that any randomness there need not destroy causal regularities at the coarser level (perhaps of brain mechanisms) where laws governing human behaviour may be expected. It is often rightly pointed out that determinism at this other level has not been proved true. But nor is it clear that any of the embarrassingly large variety of 'refutations' of determinism have succeeded in proving it false.

The determinist picture is at least an apparent threat to self-creation. A familiar line of thought says that, if determinism is true, a Laplacean scientist, with God-like knowledge of the causal laws and of the circumstances in which they operated, could successfully predict the relevant future events, including human actions. A person doing anything other than the predicted action would falsify one or more of the causal laws. But, the argument goes, determinism requires that some set of relevant causal laws is true, which is incompatible with their being falsified. So determinism is incompatible with anyone not doing the predicted action. Ruling out all courses of action but one, it eliminates genuine choice.

The threat to self-creation posed by this interpretation of determinism is twofold. The first point is obvious: the elimination of genuine choice leaves no room for choosing what sort of person to be. The second threat is to the emotional context of self-creation. If people never really choose between actions, this makes problematic all those emotional responses which presuppose the responsibility of agents. Reflexive emotional responses to our own conduct, as well as the parallel responses to the acts of others, may be undermined in favour of Spinozist detachment.

The simplest, but least satisfactory, reply to this line of thought is libertarianism. The libertarian denies that we need accept the premiss of the attack: that the relevant events are the product of causal laws. Strong versions rely on the various supposed refutations of determinism. A weak version says that determinism, while not refuted, has not been proved, and so we need not accept conclusions based on it as a premiss.

The problems for this position are well known. The question of what causal laws exist looks like an empirical one. It is hard to see

what would count as a good *a priori* argument for the view that, say, at the neurophysiological level, there must be some causally inexplicable events. And, even if we did have such an *a priori* argument, there would be a problem of knowing which were the uncaused events. It is not clear what would discriminate between an uncaused event and an event for which the causal explanation had not yet been discovered. Nor is it obvious that the uncaused events, if they could be identified, would correlate in any interesting way with the process of decision-making. And, even if some key element in decision-making turned out to be uncaused, there is the problem of giving a coherent account of how this would make decisions free rather than merely random.

For these familiar reasons, libertarianism will not be explored here. It will be assumed that any plausible view will not depend on the denial of determinism. On this assumption we are left with the choice between William James's 'hard' and 'soft' determinism. Hard determinism is the line of attack we are considering: the view that determinism is incompatible with genuine choice, and hence with responsibility and its associated emotional responses. Soft determinism, or compatibilism, asserts the compatibility of free choice or responsibility with determinism. (In some versions, they even require it.)<sup>1</sup>

In the debate over the hard-determinist attack on freedom and responsibility, soft determinists have developed two main alternative strategies. The first is to work out a model of free action which does not require indeterminism, and thereby to challenge the hard determinist's claim that causal predictability eliminates genuine choice. This strategy is characteristically presented (in perhaps misleadingly 'linguistic' form) as an analysis of what is ordinarily meant by such words as 'can' or 'possible'. The second strategy, rejecting a later stage of the hard-determinist argument, is to defend responsibility (and associated attitudes and responses) in ways that sidestep issues about alternative possibilities of choice.

#### 4. *Models of Free Action*

Actions can be seen schematically as the product of beliefs, desires, and abilities.<sup>2</sup> From Aristotle onwards, defects of beliefs or abilities, rather than of desires, have been seen as the primary

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, a compatibilist, unlike a soft determinist, need not be committed to the truth of determinism. This distinction is unimportant for the argument here, and I shall be casual about it, treating the positions as equivalent.

<sup>2</sup> 'Abilities' is used here in a *very* broad sense, to include opportunities.

limitations on freedom. And this reflects excuses commonly accepted. It is the day of the coronation, and the king has not turned up. Few excuses would do. 'I got the day wrong', or 'the door of my bedroom was jammed and I could not get out' are hardly adequate, yet they are gestures in the right direction. But 'I wanted to spend the day reorganizing my stamp-collection' is not even a candidate for being an excuse.

Accounts of free action can be characterized by the kinds of defects of beliefs and abilities which are held to impair an agent's freedom. In the case of abilities, the simplest accounts focus on very obvious external factors, such as being locked up or being threatened with a gun. The most obvious internal defects involve lack of physical ability. Moore, defending his claim that there is a sense of 'can' in which we can do many things we do not do, gives examples of this kind: 'I *could* have walked a mile in twenty minutes this morning, but I certainly could *not* have run two miles in five minutes', and 'It is true, as a rule, that cats *can* climb trees, whereas dogs can't'.<sup>1</sup>

On Moore's view, I am able to do something where nothing will frustrate my choice to do it. Whatever the merits of this as an account of how such words as 'can' or 'could' are used, it fits in well with one of our main reasons for being interested in people's abilities. Suppose I have just heard that the train you are about to travel on is going to be blown up, but I do not go to the station to warn you. I have no vehicle or telephone. In one version of the case, I hear the news twenty minutes before the train leaves from the station a mile away. In the other version, I hear five minutes before the train leaves from the station two miles away. (To avoid a complication, suppose this is all taking place in Mussolini's Italy.) In the case where I had twenty minutes to walk the mile, my failure to do so suggests criticism of my motivation. It looks as if I perhaps wanted you dead, or at least that I did not care enough to take the trouble to warn you. In the other case, there need be no such presumption. My obvious

<sup>1</sup> I like 'as a rule'. No one is going to catch out Moore by citing some cat with amputated legs.

The analysis of these claims about being able to do things we do not do has become very subtle, especially since the issues raised by Moore were re-examined in Austin's influential contribution to this series of lectures. The outline here is highly schematic: a view from a great height, with much detail lost. Philosophers in the analytic tradition have a healthy suspicion of surveys which lose the finer details. But an archaeological interest in underlying structure (or even thoughts about seeing the wood for the trees) may suggest that aerial photographs sometimes have their uses.

inability is sufficient explanation, without postulating any hostility or casualness towards you.

Normally, when reacting to the behaviour of others, our interest in their abilities is primarily as a source of evidence about their motivation. My not caring enough to warn you may make me the object of resentment or blame. People will be interested in how far I was from the station only because of its relevance to the question of whether I did care. This is why blame, resentment, or guilt can sometimes be appropriate even where an action is unavoidable.<sup>1</sup> Take a case with a deviant causal chain. When I was warned of the danger, I was two miles from the station, and the train was to leave in five minutes. But my watch was wrong. I thought I had an hour to get there, but I still did not bother to do anything. Although I was unable to warn you, my guilt (or, if the full story comes out, your friends' resentment) may be quite justified. Where facts about abilities are misleading about motivation, they can be ignored. We are often aware of this in our own case.

This centrality of desire is often overlooked because our thinking is dominated by the model of legal responsibility. If no steps are taken, merely wanting, or even intending, to commit a crime involves no liability to punishment. There are good reasons for not attaching legal penalties to mere psychological states: we want to encourage last-minute changes of mind, and, most importantly, we do not want hopelessly unenforceable laws. But these are not reasons against guilt, resentment, or blame being primarily directed on motivational states.

The first stage, then, of a compatibilist account of free action is to draw attention to a sense of 'can' which is to be explained in terms of the absence of factors which would block the expression of choices in actions, and to show how in ordinary moral thinking this sort of ability is relevant to our assessments of motivation. The absence of these blocking factors is compatible with determinism. And, it is argued, their absence is all that is presupposed when we hold people responsible for what they do.

But there are reasons for thinking that, at best, this is only a first stage in constructing an adequate compatibilist theory. Suppose that we allow that there is a sense of 'can' or 'could' which is to be explained along the lines that Moore suggests. There may also be, as Moore allows, another sense in which 'he could have done otherwise' is excluded by determinism. Do we know that we can ignore this other sense when thinking about responsibility? The

<sup>1</sup> Harry Frankfurt makes this point, in 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *Journal of Philosophy*, 1969.

importance we attach to motivation suggests that Moore's sense of 'can' is central to our present practice of holding people responsible. The hard determinist may accept that Moore's sense has a function internal to our present practices. But he will go on to claim that because (in the other sense) we cannot do anything except what we do, our present practices are indefensible. The compatibilist cannot answer this case merely by descriptive anthropology.

A second, related, doubt about this compatibilist account concerns the sharp separation of questions about desires from questions about ability. This is relatively unproblematic when we are attending to physical abilities, but less so when we turn to psychological abilities. When we consider the cases that cause problems about 'diminished responsibility', such as alcoholism or compulsive desires to steal, it is not clear that the only blocks to freedom are those that come between choice and action. Perhaps choices themselves can be unfree. And, quite apart from special psychological conditions, it seems reasonable to reply to Moore: 'I can do what I choose, but can I choose what I choose?' Or, as the question is sometimes put, 'I can do what I want, but can I want what I want?'

In answer to this point, a more sophisticated version of the compatibilist account invokes higher-order desires. I can want to have some desires rather than others. And, where I have conflicting desires, I can want one desire rather than another to win when I choose how to act. In developing an account in which these points are central, Frankfurt calls the first-order desire that is expressed in choice the person's 'will', and he calls second-order desires for certain first-order desires to be one's will 'second-order volitions'.<sup>1</sup> There can be desires and volitions of higher orders than the second (though soon we start to lose grip on what it is to 'desire to desire to desire to . . .') For Frankfurt, freedom of action is having the ability to do what you want, while freedom of will is the ability to have the will you want. On Frankfurt's view, these two freedoms together make up the whole of freedom. He says of someone who has both: 'Then he is not only free to do what he wants to do; he is also free to want what he wants to want. It seems to me that he has, in that case, all the freedom it is possible to desire or to conceive.'<sup>2</sup>

There is a problem for Frankfurt's account of freedom of will,

<sup>1</sup> 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', *ibid.*, 1971. Page references here are to the reprinting in Gary Watson (ed.), *Free Will*, Oxford Readings in Philosophy Series (Oxford, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 92.

parallel to the problem faced by Moore's one-level account of freedom of action. At whatever level of volition we stop, can we not ask whether *that* volition was avoidable? Frankfurt's answer to this uses the idea of identification with a desire:

When a person identifies himself *decisively* with one of his first order desires, this commitment 'resounds' through the potentially endless array of higher orders. Consider a person who, without reservation or conflict, wants to be motivated by the desire to concentrate on his work. The fact that his second order volition to be moved by this desire is a decisive one means that there is no room for questions concerning the pertinence of desires or volitions of higher orders. Suppose the person is asked whether he wants to want to concentrate on his work. He can properly insist that this question concerning a third order desire does not arise.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulty with this reply is to see what 'identification' consists in, and what its relationship is to higher-order rather than lower-order desires. Gary Watson has argued that, if identification is what is crucial, we can identify directly with courses of action, rather than with desires, and that this makes the idea of higher-order volitions 'superfluous or at least secondary'.<sup>2</sup> Watson suggests that we need here a distinction between desires and values. It may be a conceptual truth that we act on our *strongest* desire, but this may not be what we most want, which should be interpreted as a question of what we most *value*.

But values are linked with motivation. Even if what we primarily value is a course of action, this will generate a higher-order volition. An alcoholic satisfies his strongest desire by having a drink. But if what he 'most wants' (in the sense of what would reflect his values, or what he most cares about) is to escape his addiction, this will give him the (unsatisfied) higher-order volition for his desire to drink not to prevail. Conflicts between desires and values are expressed in higher-order volitions. We should prefer the desire to be eliminated, or at least reduced in strength, rather than be satisfied.

The vague phrase 'identifying with a desire' obscures a distinction between two kinds of 'identification'. In one way, I identify with a desire when to act on it in a particular case will reflect what I most care about. But, in another way, I identify with a desire which fits in with my project of self-creation: when I want to be the sort of person who has (and perhaps who in

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> 'Free Agency', *Journal of Philosophy*, 1975. Reprinted in Watson, op. cit. This quotation is from p. 109 of the reprinted version.

general acts on) desires of that kind. These two kinds of identification may conflict.

Consider a variant on the 'integrity' cases discussed by Bernard Williams. A political leader is fighting an election whose outcome he thinks overwhelmingly important. (The rival party is a Nazi party, or is trigger-happy about nuclear weapons.) A scandal breaks about one of the political leader's friends. The politician has the decent instinct to speak out in defence of his friend. But he is warned (plausibly, let us suppose) that close association with his disgraced friend may lose his party the election. So, reluctantly, he stays silent. He does not want his desire to speak out to be his 'will', in Frankfurt's sense, because he accepts the case for silence. So, in one way, he does not identify with the desire to speak out: it conflicts with what he most cares about. But, in another way, he does identify with that desire. He wants to be the sort of person who, under normal circumstances, will speak out on such an issue. He regards his present silence as a tactical retreat from this policy rather than as a permanent surrender. (The danger of self-deception hardly needs pointing out.) And in *this* sense of 'identification', he identifies with the first-order desire, rather than with the higher-order volition which prevails.

Perhaps the fullest degree of freedom is only realized where I act on desires with which I identify in both ways. A sophisticated compatibilist account of free action will have several dimensions along which freedom is assessed. On one dimension the extent to which an agent is free will be inversely proportional to the strength of the constraints, pressures, or limitations of ability which make it hard or impossible to translate his decisions into actions. On a second dimension, his freedom will be inversely proportional to the degree of discrepancy between his decisions and his second-order volitions. And, on a third dimension, his freedom will be inversely proportional to the discrepancy between his decisions and those that would flow from his project of self-creation.

What is the ideal case of freedom? There must be nothing preventing or hampering the expression of my decisions in action. There must be harmony between my values and the desires which dominate my choices. And there must be harmony between both of those and my project of self-creation. Perhaps where all this holds I have, in Frankfurt's phrase, 'all the freedom it is possible to desire or to conceive'.

Does this account of free action, which in no way presupposes indeterminism, show that the incompatibilist is mistaken? The sophisticated incompatibilist may not be willing to concede at this

point. (His position need not depend on the libertarian view that gaps in the causal mechanism would in some way render the action free. He may regard belief in free agency as incoherent: compatible neither with determinism nor with indeterminism.) He may agree that we have all the freedom that it is possible to desire or to conceive. But he may say this is not much, and not enough to justify responsibility. Take someone who behaves badly, with the highest degree of freedom. Had he decided to refrain from this behaviour, he would have succeeded. He wanted to behave that way; it reflected his values; he is happy to be that sort of person. (He is in this way a bit like a psychopath, but he has none of the psychopath's typical inability to understand other people's values.) He seems the ideal candidate for blame. But, when we express our disapproval, he has a reply. We can shape ourselves in the light of our values and higher-order desires, but this process has to start with some set of values and desires that we just take as given. And the content of *that* set of values and desires is a product of our genes and early environment, neither of which we could choose. This original set is, in Williams's phrase, a matter of 'constitutive luck'.<sup>1</sup>

When the debate about responsibility is conducted solely in terms of the nature of free action, it is inconclusive. The compatibilist produces increasingly sophisticated refinements in his model, but is unable to purge it of all elements of constitutive luck. He says it is absurd to suppose that responsibility demands more freedom than we can desire or conceive. The incompatibilist is unimpressed, and says it is morally outrageous to blame people for having had bad luck in the genetic and environmental lotteries. It is not clear what more can be said about free action on either side, and the argument seems to end in stalemate.

##### 5. *Defences of the Reactive Attitudes*

Compatibilists sometimes either supplement or replace the strategy of characterizing free action by a second approach: a direct defence of the attitudes and reactions associated with holding people responsible for what they do.

This strategy, in the simple version proposed by Schlick, stresses the social utility of these responses. Praise and blame, like reward and punishment, are seen as manipulative devices: influencing motives in order to change behaviour.

No doubt reward and punishment can be consciously and

<sup>1</sup> 'Moral Luck', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume, 1976.

successfully used to change what people do. Social pressures often function through our desire to be praised or to avoid blame. But the conscious manipulative use of praise or blame is less straightforward. Blame can influence people in two different ways. It can operate by surface pressure: people do not like being spoken to sharply, or more generally being treated in an unfriendly way. Or it can operate by deep pressure, where what is disliked is not the behaviour but the attitude of moral condemnation it expresses. It is not so much your tone of voice I mind as the fact that you think worse of my character. Yet being blamed by Schlick might not be like this. He says that

the question regarding responsibility is the question: who, in a given case, is to be punished? . . . The question of who is responsible is the question concerning the *correct point of application of the motive*. . . — It is a matter only of knowing who is to be punished or rewarded in order that punishment and reward function as such — be able to achieve their goal.<sup>1</sup>

And Schlick treats blame as a version of punishment. If someone behaves badly to Schlick, maliciously spreading the false rumour that he has been converted to Hegelianism, he may express his blame when he sees him. Perhaps he will say: 'This contemptible behaviour arouses in me indignation, combined with a cringing revulsion at the deformity of character it displays.' But if the person being addressed knows that behind this utterance lies a cool calculation of the best way of influencing his motives, he may find it hard to accept in the way intended. Deep pressure may be more effective than surface pressure in influencing motives, but it may be self-defeating to adopt deep pressure as a conscious strategy.

There is also a problem for Schlick's view about our moral reactions to our own actions. He says of the feeling of responsibility:

if because of this feeling I willingly suffer blame for my behaviour or reproach myself, and thereby admit that I might have acted otherwise, this means that other behaviour was compatible with the laws of volition—of course, granted other motives. And I myself desire the existence of such motives and bear the pain (regret and sorrow) caused by my behaviour so that its repetition will be prevented. To blame oneself means just to apply motives of improvement to oneself, which is usually the task of the educator.<sup>2</sup>

The problem is that, unless we are satisfied with the compatibilist account of free action, we may regard the fact that we had

<sup>1</sup> *Problems of Ethics*, translated by David Rynin (New York, 1961), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155–6.

undesirable motives as something beyond our control: as a piece of bad luck. Or, if these motives were under our control, our lack of motivation to change *them*, at some stage further back in the causal story, was a piece of bad luck. And, if we regard our undesirable motivation as bad luck, our efforts to manipulate ourselves by self-blame may fail through inability to adopt the required attitude. 'I shall apply motives of improvement to myself', I may say, but perhaps the required feelings of guilt will not come flooding in.

This consequentialist defence of the reactive attitudes to others and ourselves fails. We cannot just switch on responses, whether to other people or to ourselves, because those responses would have good consequences. The responses depend on the belief that they are justified in some non-consequentialist way.

A more sophisticated defence of these attitudes recognizes that they are more than aspects of social control: that, as Strawson puts it, 'Our practices do not merely exploit our natures, they express them.'<sup>1</sup> On this view, blame and guilt are part of a whole range of responses involved in relationships, including gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings. If determinism were to undermine moral praise and blame, it would equally undermine this whole range of reactive attitudes, in favour of detached objectivity. But this does not seem a practical possibility. Strawson says: 'A sustained objectivity of inter-personal attitude, and the human isolation which that would entail, does not seem to be something of which human beings would be capable, even if some general truth were a theoretical ground for it.'<sup>2</sup> And further, even if we were able to opt to abandon the reactive attitudes, Strawson argues that the truth of determinism would be insufficient to establish that option as the only rational one: 'if we could imagine what we cannot have, viz. a choice in this matter, then we could choose rationally only in the light of an assessment of the gains and losses to human life, its enrichment or impoverishment; and the truth or falsity of a general thesis of determinism would not bear on the rationality of *this* choice'.<sup>3</sup>

Strawson's attractive and subtle line of thought does more justice to the nature of these reactions, and to their role in our lives, than the simpler view of them as manipulative devices. But there are problems about assumptions made by this defence of our attitudes.

First the assumption that all the reactive attitudes stand or fall together might be questioned. Could we not be justified in

<sup>1</sup> P. F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1962, p. 210.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

choosing selective detachment in preference to global detachment? Suppose that we decide that love and gratitude enrich our lives, while blame and resentment make them poorer. Perhaps there are logical or empirical links between the various attitudes, such that selective detachment is conceptually incoherent or psychologically impossible. But a detailed, case-by-case examination is needed before we can be sure of this. And, even if Strawson is right about the practical impossibility of global detachment, it does not follow that selective detachment presents the same degree of difficulty.

The other questionable assumption is the consequentialist view of rationality implied by the argument. The question of the rationality of our reactive attitudes is taken to be simply one of whether they make life better or worse. The hard determinist need not deny that the reactive attitudes enrich our lives. His claim is that they depend on presuppositions which are false or incoherent, so that the irrationality of retaining them is of a different kind from that considered by Strawson. (Imagine a tribe whose activities are permeated by religion. They are troubled by arguments for atheism, which seem to threaten their whole way of life. Then they are visited by a philosopher from Vienna who tells them not to worry: religion can be defended as a useful way of getting people to do things. Some of the tribe, though not all, are reassured. Then a much more subtle philosopher, this time from Oxford, comes to them. He describes the complex connections between their religion and other aspects of their life, and says that they will find abandoning religion a psychological impossibility. He then says that, even if they could abandon it, it would be absurd to suppose that the truth of atheism would make it rational to do so: the question of rationality is about whether religion enriches or impoverishes their lives. Most of them are then quite reassured. But a few persisting doubters are left wondering whether an atheist can really pray.)

The hard determinist case is that blame presupposes a kind of freedom from which all elements of constitutive luck have been purged, in the same way that prayer presupposes the existence of someone you are praying to. However valuable the reactive or the religious attitudes may be, they are simply not available to people who do not accept the relevant theoretical presuppositions.

The two compatibilist strategies lead to the same impasse. The compatibilist offers increasingly sophisticated accounts of free action, only to find that the hard determinist thinks that actions cannot be free without satisfying the impossible requirement of

being free of any element of constitutive luck. The compatibilist then tries the other strategy, of offering increasingly sophisticated defences of the reactive attitudes. But the hard determinist replies that those attitudes are conceptually tied to the same unattainable version of freedom. One important reason for the free-will issue seeming so difficult is that it is not clear how we can adjudicate between these conflicting claims about the kind of freedom which reactive attitudes presuppose. The debate comes down to the question of whether this part of our conceptual scheme includes the additional, unsatisfiable presupposition insisted on by the incompatibilist. And, as we have no satisfactory general theory about how to identify the deep structure of a conceptual scheme, both parties are left appealing to intuitions.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it is not fruitful to pursue this debate about the extra presupposition any further. There is a possibly more successful approach: that of looking more closely at what would follow if we decided that the hard determinist was right.

#### 6. *What Would the World of Hard Determinism Be Like?*

A sophisticated hard determinist will accept some of the compatibilist case. He will accept that the compatibilist model of free action brings out real differences between cases of maximal freedom and other cases that fall short. He will accept that the reactive attitudes are useful means of mutual influence, and that they are at the heart of our interwoven emotional lives. Where he

<sup>1</sup> When a debate is a stand-off in this way, the point usually most visible to the participants on each side is that their own intuitions have not been undermined by the other side's arguments. This can lead to a confident tone on both sides. G. E. M. Anscombe says: 'Ever since Kant it has been a familiar claim among philosophers, that one can believe in both physical determinism and "ethical" freedom. The reconciliations have always seemed to me to be either so much gobbledegook, or to make the alleged freedom of action quite unreal. My actions are mostly physical movements; if these physical movements are physically predetermined by processes which I do not control, then my freedom is perfectly illusory. The truth of physical indeterminism is then indispensable if we are to make anything of the claim to freedom.' (*Causality and Determination* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 26.) Donald Davidson, on the other hand, says: 'There are the broadsides from those who believe they can see, or even prove, that freedom is inconsistent with the assumption that actions are causally determined, at least if the causes can be traced back to events outside the agent. I shall not be directly concerned with such arguments, since I know of none that is more than superficially plausible. Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Moore, Schlick, Ayer, Stevenson and a host of others have done what can be done, or ought ever to have been needed, to remove the confusions that can make determinism seem to oppose freedom.' ('Freedom to Act', in T. Honderich (ed.), *Essays on Freedom of Action*, p. 134.)

differs from the compatibilist is in his view that the maximum possible freedom, because it retains an element of constitutive luck, is insufficient to justify the reactive attitudes.

This version of hard determinism does not make it impossible to deliberate about what to do, or about what sort of person you would like to be. There are two parts to the point. Hard determinism does not entail the fatalist view that things will be as they will be, regardless of what people do. This version of fatalism has the consequence that a person's decision to drive when drunk makes no difference to things: that there would have been a car crash whatever he had decided to do. This absurd view does not follow from determinism. The second point is that, because determinism does not entail fatalism, it is not futile for the hard determinist to weigh up reasons for action. In a determinist world, reasoning is part of the causal process influencing action, just as actions are part of the causal process influencing later states of affairs. It is incoherent to offer determinism as a reason for deciding never to make decisions based on reasons. So, a clear-headed hard determinist will not feel debarred by considerations of this sort from a project of self-creation.

The obstacle to self-creation which seems more serious is the effect of hard determinism on our reactive attitudes. We have seen that our emotional responses, especially towards the actions of ourselves and others, play a central role in self-creation. And central to this range of attitudes are the ones linked to responsibility, such as pride, guilt, resentment, gratitude, and some sorts of regret. Let us call these the 'desert-based attitudes'. The hard determinist says the desert-based attitudes are unjustifiable, because constitutive luck is both always present and incompatible with desert. He will not so much urge us to give them up, as suggest that they will not be available to us when we think clearly about the implications of determinism. (Only a confused atheist will try to pray, as there is no possibility of his succeeding.)

But it is misleading to suppose that, because the desert-based attitudes are closed to the hard determinist, his only responses to people will be coolly scientific. There is a range of reactive attitudes to people which are not desert-based. Consider the aesthetic-cum-sexual responses we have to people's appearance, or to their style and charm. We have aesthetic responses of another kind to people's intellectual qualities: to their being imaginative, independent, or quick on the uptake. These responses are not desert-based. We do not in general suppose that people are attractive, or quick on the uptake, because of praiseworthy efforts

they have made. On the contrary these seem paradigm cases of features owing a lot to constitutive luck. Perhaps this is one reason why we classify our responses to them as aesthetic rather than moral.

These aesthetic responses to people's abilities and charm will help save the hard determinist from a totally dry emotional life. There seems no reason why he should not go further, and have aesthetic responses to people's motives and character. He can admire someone's generosity, so long as he does not deny that this is in part good luck. It will be like admiring someone's musical talent. Similarly, when someone swindles him, he can have unfavourable responses to that person's character. His judgement that someone is repellently selfish in outlook will be an aesthetic one, like the judgement that someone has a repulsive smile.

These aesthetic responses could be communicated, either to the person concerned, or to others. And, just as people want to be thought physically attractive, or rather than ugly, so people would care about aesthetic responses to their character. Desert-based attitudes, like blame, would have been renounced. But unfavourable aesthetic responses to character as revealed in actions might be just as effective as blame in putting pressure on people to change their behaviour.

In a similar way, the abandonment of pride, guilt, and other desert-based responses to our own actions would not eliminate all reactive attitudes to ourselves. Aesthetic responses paralleling the abandoned desert-based ones could grow up. I could regret being selfish or dishonest in the way I regret having no talent for music or for sport. I could judge my actions aesthetically as admirable or appalling, and these thoughts could be charged with feeling.

At this point it may be unclear whether these emotionally charged aesthetic responses to my own actions are really any different from pride or guilt. It is equally unclear how far the aesthetic responses to the characters of other people differ from moral praise and blame. The boundary between hard and soft determinism starts to seem unclear. As hard determinism gets less schematic and crude, it incorporates responses which look less and less different from the desert-based attitudes it repudiates. The result of the process can be represented in two ways. On one view, this is a triumph for hard determinism: we can expel desert-based attitudes and yet have emotions more warm-blooded than those appropriate in a psychiatrist or a social worker. In another view, this is the collapse of hard determinism into incoherence: it

accommodates responses virtually indistinguishable from those which by definition it repudiates.

We do not need to settle the issue of whether this upshot is a triumph for hard or for soft determinism. It is enough that it allows the kinds of reactive responses to ourselves and to other people which are needed for self-creation. Even if everything we do in our present world is causally determined, perception of this is no threat to self-creation. And so those who defend Brave New World, or other societies based on control of behaviour, are wrong to say that such societies do not significantly differ from our own determinist world. Determinism leaves room for self-creation, while thoroughgoing behaviour control from outside does not.

### III

#### 7. *Self-Creation and Other People*

The threat that unscrupulous authorities will abuse technologies for controlling the mind is obvious. The other danger is the benevolent use of these techniques, guided by some narrow and crude utilitarianism. (B. F. Skinner says: 'A better world will be liked by those who live in it because it has been designed with an eye to what is, or can be, most reinforcing.'<sup>1</sup> Something is 'reinforcing' to the extent that it leads to the repetition of the behaviour that elicited it. So reinforcement is a rough guide to how much something is desired. But second-order attitudes to desires need not be reflected in this. For an alcoholic, even one desperate to escape the addiction, whisky is highly reinforcing.)

The inadequacy of crude forms of utilitarianism in articulating our objections to behaviour control does not show that any utilitarian view is hopeless here. But an adequate utilitarianism will at least have to incorporate a much richer psychology. More needs to be said than simply that we should aim for satisfying the maximum number of desires, weighted according to their strength. Even a strong desire that we should happily eliminate rather than satisfy is not on a par with a desire central to our project of self-creation. (One problem with the traditional debate between utilitarians and supporters of pluralist systems of values is whether there is a clear boundary between the two kinds of view. Intuitively plausible pluralist systems do not include values with no bearing on people's interests, and sophisticated forms of utilitarianism take account of psychological complexities in a way that starts to look more like pluralism.)

<sup>1</sup> *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 161.

The difficulty in resisting piecemeal extensions of behaviour control is that, at each stage, the proponents can point to some specific advantage, such as a reduction in the crime rate, against which resistance can seem irrational. Yet we do dislike Brave New World. Resisting the slide towards it requires explicitness about the values it affronts. We dislike the fact that it is a static society. In our present world, our life and our ways of seeing things will change in ways we cannot predict: we are part of the open-ended development of human consciousness. And this open-endedness partly results from and at the same time provides room for projects of self-creation. These values provide reasons, rather than inarticulate revulsion, to weigh in the balance against the simple utilitarian gains offered by each extension of behaviour control. And the recognition that self-creation is possible, even if our actions are causally determined, enables us to resist the claim that the truth of determinism obliterates the distinction between our lives and those in Brave New World.

The value of self-creation will not always tell against psycho-technology. Some of these techniques could extend our powers of self-creation. Suppose each person had a device which could send signals to sites in his own brain to switch desires on or off. This could prevent the central projects in our lives being disrupted by distracting and irrelevant desires. But how we should use this gadget would depend on the desires prevailing at the time. Someone who strongly desired to adhere to his project of losing weight might switch off his desire to eat. But someone whose desire to eat was very strong might switch off the desire to lose weight, in order to be untroubled by feelings of guilt.

Some people have convergent lives, effectively dominated by their central projects and their deepest commitments. At the other extreme are divergent lives, where people trying to make a career in the Civil Service, or trying to write their novel, are constantly blown off course by distracting immediate desires. Most of us are somewhere in the middle: more like convergers about some things, more like divergers about others. Giving us the technology for controlling desires would probably make us more extreme. Convergers would switch off almost all distracting desires. Divergers could damp down even further the long-term desires that conflict with immediate satisfactions. These techniques would make us more sharply different from each other.

We value having a wide variety of kinds of people, which is partly a result of self-creation. But if technology greatly increases our powers to shape ourselves, we may move disturbingly far apart.

Biologists have the concept of genetic drift, where a small subgroup of a population, left to breed on its own, ends up with different gene frequencies from that of the parent population. We can see a similar process of 'cultural drift', where groups of people are cut off in small communities with little or no communication with their parent group. (Imagine a group of English people, who emigrated to a remote island, some time in the 1940s, and who have been out of touch ever since.) Unless it leads to conflicts, cultural drift between communities is a beneficial addition to human variety. But if increased powers of self-creation led to cultural drift at the individual level, even in the absence of conflict there could be problems. We could lose the degree of similarity involved in the selective adhesiveness of friendship. We might become over-absorbed in what we were making of ourselves, and increasingly uncongenial to each other.

Keats, in one of his letters, describes Charles Wentworth Dilke as someone uncongenial in this way:

A Man who cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his Mind about every thing. . . . All the stubborn arguers you meet with are of the same brood— They never begin upon a subject they have not preresolved on. They want to hammer their nail into you and if you turn the point, still they think you wrong. Dilke will never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it. He is a Godwin methodist.<sup>1</sup>

Keats says of people like this that they have 'no light and shade', and is eloquent on the frustrations of their company:

To have nothing to do, and to be surrounded with unpleasant human identities; who press upon one just enough to prevent one getting into a lazy position; and not enough to interest or rouse one; is a capital punishment of a capital crime: for is not giving up, through good nature, one's time to people who have no light and shade a capital crime?<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately there are checks on the tendency towards mutually uncongenial variety. The pull towards self-creation is counter-balanced by the need for love and friendship, and by all the gregarious and sociable impulses. And, even within the project of self-creation, we are largely dependent on contact with other congenial people. Self-creation outside relationships would be a truncated affair. Some of the features we may want to have, such as generosity or tolerance, logically require a social context. Others depend on emotional responses arising in relationships.

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of John Keats*, edited by Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1970), p. 326.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

And the motive for wanting to be a certain kind of person may sometimes be bound up with a desire for the respect of others. The struggle for appreciation and recognition, which can be so naked in children, carries on below the surface in adults. If we ever live in a world of universal material plenty, competition may be for the means of self-expression, and for recognition and respect.

We do things together and share our responses to what we do and to what we experience. We express responses for our own satisfaction, as well as for other people. And, when our responses are expressed, this is only partly a matter of describing states of mind already in existence. The responses are partly formed by our finding words to articulate them. And, in shaping our responses, we shape ourselves. By doing things together and by talking together, we share in creating ourselves and each other.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Among those who have influenced my thinking on these issues are Vivette Glover, Richard Keshen, Richard Lindley, Michael Lockwood, and Galen Strawson.