The Examined Life Re-examined

By Doug James

Socrates once said that the unexamined life is not worth living. In this day of continual struggle for the minds of men, I think that he might have amended his statement. The life that neither knows nor examines its own bases is not only not worth living, but in our day is dangerous to its society. In our “other directed” society, this is the main weapon we have to fight the pressures of propaganda and conformity. Being the children of our culture bars us from complete escape, and we dare not lose our sense of reality. At the same time, we must continually re-examine these realities in the light of our greater knowledge and understanding. Thus I am attempting to set forth in this paper some thinking now six years begun. I hope that it may focus another small ray of light on our thinking.

The central idea in my thought is that the universe is causal in nature. Or, more simply, every cause has an effect and every effect a cause. To the best of my knowledge, everyone, whether consciously or not, accepts this hypothesis to a limited degree. We depend on the validity of causality every day and exhibit our dependence on it continually. Very few people will consciously walk off a cliff without expecting to fall. In addition, most people’s actions reflect the assumption that those actions will produce certain reactions in other people. When you punch someone in the nose, you do so with some idea of what his reaction is going to be. In spite of this common acceptance of causality, most people do not accept it as a universal principle, however. This is quite understandable because as a universal principle it forces one to several inescapable conclusions:

1. There is no “free will.”

2. There is no morality in the universe. Thus it is a moral.

3. There is no absolute purpose in the universe, though there are movement and energy.

These conclusions do not coincide with our present cultural traditions and so are unpopular, especially because they seem ominously close to some Communist assumptions. But unpopular or not, they are valid to me, and popularity should not be a criterion for validity.

Due to the expanding knowledge of science, and especially of psychology since the Pavlovian experiments, there remains only one main argument against these contentions. Those who oppose these ideas say that causality doesn’t apply to men’s minds and wills. They maintain that there is something within man that has no connection with other factors, but makes choices. This they call “free will,” or “spirit,” or “man’s inner self.” The proof that this other self exists supposedly lies in the fact that no one can completely predict his or another person’s actions. This premise neglects the many actions of man that can be predicted. This is the fact that deserves our attention, for the major obstacle to more accurate prediction is not that causality does not apply, but is the difficulty of knowing the complete situation in a person’s mind, a difficulty of observation. The existing methods, such as behavioral analysis, have been remarkably effective in spite of their indirectness. Time after time in his short history, man has assumed that there were mystical causes because he did not fully understand the nature of things, and time after time, these beliefs have disintegrated because of the scrutiny of fuller understanding.

An excellent case in point would be the changes that have come about in criminology, penology, and the treatment of juvenile delinquency. Though we have not arrived at an Utopia by any stretch of the imagination, we are finally beginning to break away from the fiction of utter individual responsibility. There may be a limit to which we can apply this, similar to the limits of Heisenberg’s principle of indeterminacy, but this does not negate the universal nature of causality.

In all this thought, there is one disturbing factor. To me, and to every other human being, free will is a reality. It seems to us that we do make choices, and that free will is implied in these choices. Naturally psychologists can explain this feeling in causal terms, but such explanations lack meaning because we always have the illusion of free choice with us. To fit this disturbing factor into our thought, we must understand the basis of causal analysis, and become pragmatic.

Whenever someone tries to discover a causal relation, he must assume the position of a perfect observer, that is, he must know all the relevant factors, and must observe the action objectively, without disturbing it. Thus the methods of causality become useless in all the personal relations of an individual
because he can't possibly detach himself from them. In addition, the "reality" of free will is directly contradictory to the whole idea of causality. Dr. Max Planck, a brilliant German theoretical physicist, further observes that it is impossible for a person to predict his own actions completely, because whenever he analyzes the situation from which to predict, he has changed the situation he was analyzing.

If causality is the central idea of my thought, then I must add that the reality of choice in the human situation is equally important. It is not a refutation of the causal assumption. It is a very necessary practical admission, that is, for a certain frame of reference, we must consider illusion a reality. The importance of this idea is so often lost by determinists that it seems like a new idea. Too often, the determinist is carried away by the primary implications of causality into a mechanistic system that completely ignores choice and the whole realm of human relations. Such oversights are the origin of many ill effects that science and determinism have had upon our society.

A concluding premise can be taken from this analysis. Though we are constantly drawn to the human frame of reference, and often feel far removed from what we consider the "cold, hard and inanimate" nature of things, our conclusions gain validity from causality. If we do not recognize this, and do not continually seek to keep in contact with true reality, our conclusions are liable to harm both ourselves and our society. This is true not only of such things as touching a hot stove, but is true of basic human "rights," religious beliefs, and philosophies.

Sally Falch, junior from Cleveland, in her first published poem, catches the music of the . . .

Carousel

By Sally Falch

Plaster pirouettes parade
On girating ground,
Heirs of Eohippus break
Toward blue grass sound.

Riders sway, suspended,
And time taps on.
Patient, the ponies pause,
Then resume their marathon.