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# DETERMINISM AND INEVITABILITY\*

by  
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To claim of an event  $e$  that it was inevitable is at least to claim that it was determined. And to claim that  $c$  determined  $e$  but did not make  $e$  inevitable is to imply, if  $e$  was inevitable, that something  $x$  takes up the slack between determination and inevitability. So " $e$  was inevitable" is equal to " $e$  was determined" +  $x$ , and the conceptual task is to solve for  $x$ . I construe Beardsley's thesis to be that  $x \neq 0$ . I criticize him only for failing to note that his analysis of inevitability is simply an analysis of determinism, and so for not having specified what in excess of determinism is entailed by the claim that  $e$  was inevitable. I concede that there are inevitable events and that there being such is of some importance for the concept of history.

## I

An event is inevitable if, in addition to having been determined, it could not have been avoided (*avoidability* is in the etymology of *inevitability*). Hence to claim the occurrence of inevitable events is to allow the possibility of determined but avoidable events. So the concepts of determination and avoidability are not mutually exclusive.

Consider a man who falls from a plane and is killed upon impact with the earth's surface. The physics of falling bodies, the relative inelasticity of the surface, and the frailty of human bodies make death in such a case inevitable if nothing under the conditions could have been done to abort or modulate impact with the earth. What reference to inevitability adds to the determinism of death is only the unintervenability into the process by preventative human actions: no condition  $c$  which, had it been varied, would have meant not- $e$ . It is the inaccessibility of these to human action which makes a determined event an inevitable one. A logical condition for being killed upon impact is that one achieve impact while alive. Had the man died of heart-attack *en tombant*, that would have prevented his death upon (by) impact. So the man could prevent  $e$  by contriving his death in mid-fall, which is circumstantially ruled out if he has no weapon, no poison, or insufficient time to employ them, and no knowledge of how to induce voluntary massive coronary. Had (more cheerily) a great bird intersected the path of fall and borne the faller off to Samarkand,  $e$  would not have happened. If we could contrive to intersect the path of fall with a helicopter (or a nabakovian flitter!), much the same result of preventing  $e$  is expected, but this is circumstantially excluded if we lack, or are unable to mobilize a vehicle of reprieve. So it is circumstances, we might say, which render inevitable events which are otherwise determined to happen. Thus if a set of conditions ( $c$ ) determines  $e$ , then whatever circumstances of ignorance or impotency insulate us from varying a member of ( $c$ ) assures that  $e$  will be inevitable. And it is not ( $c$ ) but these insulating circumstances which define our helplessness

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regarding  $e$ . Like watching with horror a man fall out of the sky, knowing that nothing that would prevent his death were it to happen can be done by us. Just the same things which make us helpless make his death inevitable.

### II

An event  $e'$  which is similar in every relevant respect to  $e$  may take place and be determined by conditions ( $c'$ ) which are similar in every relevant respect to those conditions ( $c$ ) which determine  $e$ , and yet  $e$  be inevitable and  $e'$  not. Consider two cases of *diabetes melletus*. of comparable severity. The bodies here are unable to regulate blood-sugar level and to store glycogen in the tissues. In compensation, the rate of fat metabolism is increased. Unoxidized ketones are formed which are eliminated, along with the fixed base they hold, through the urine. This removes alkali from the body, which increases the level of blood acidity. This is acidosis which, if untreated, leads to coma and then death. Death by uncontrolled diabetes was inevitable until the invention of insulin therapy by Banning and Best in 1923, since short of severe dietary measures, themselves of extreme metabolic consequence, there was no way of preventing it. Since 1923 it has been easily controlled and death by acidosis *need* never occur. Insulin happens to be made from animal pancreases. Suppose now that someone refuses insulin therapy because of religious scruples, e.g., the pancreatomized animals are forbidden, or sacred, or whatever. Refusal makes death inevitable in his case, but strictly speaking, since insulin is in plentiful supply and the means of administering it simple to use, his death could be avoided if he wanted it to be, and hence, as we have resolved to use the term, inevitability does not apply to the event. He could have prevented it had he wanted to. Whereas an event is inevitable if we could not prevent it even where we would. Our wanting or not wanting to prevent an event does not figure amongst the factors which define inevitability. The question is only whether we are *able* to prevent the event, not whether we choose to exercise the ability. When it is, so to speak, up to us whether or not to intervene, then we can intervene, and though determined, the event is no longer inevitable.

Increase in our knowledge of causal laws brings an increase in our ability to intervene if we choose to, and would correspondingly decrease inevitability were it not for those chance factors, like the lack of a weapon in our first example, which circumstantially make an event inevitable which we know how to prevent. So it may be of some use to distinguish events made inevitable by ignorance from those made inevitable by impotencies.

Now an event which renders us incapable of intervening when we know how to intervene and would intervene if we could, may be said to make the event in question inevitable. It does not, however, determine that event; it is not amongst the conditions cited as determining conditions for the event. Suppose, thus, the falling man had a knife, and would have killed himself in order not to die of the impact. But the knife slips from his hand. Then *this* event might be said to have made his death by impact inevitable. Using this as our model, we may say that if the Tet offensive made withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam inevitable, that withdrawal was to begin with determined to occur. But the Tet offensive rendered

us incapable of intervening to prevent it from happening, though before it happened, the withdrawal was not inevitable. For we could have intervened, could have altered one of the determining conditions before the Tet offensive. But not *afterwards*. Afterwards it was — too late. That the withdrawal was inevitable presupposes that it was determined. But that it was determined in no sense entails that it could not have been prevented. So its having been determined does not entail that it was inevitable.

## III

Suppose determinism is universally true. Then for each event  $e$  there is a set ( $c$ ) of conditions with reference to which the occurrence of  $e$  is fully explained. I shall further suppose what I elsewhere would be prepared to argue for and assert, that explanations entail general laws covering the explananda. So for each event  $e$ , fully explained with reference to ( $c$ ), there is a law  $Lce$  relating  $e$  to ( $c$ ). With the concept of laws there are many problems, practical and conceptual. I want here only to stress that laws are in their nature fully general, which means that they do not entail the number of their instances, so it is consistent with  $e$  being covered by  $Lce$ , that  $e$  is the *only* event in history so covered. Even so, the explanation of  $e$  will entail a general law. To be sure, we may wish to maintain that unless we have a large number of instances, we are not certain we have the explanatory law. But it is no part of the meaning of 'law' that laws have a large number of covered instances, unless we (i) adopt the Principle of Many Instances as verificatory and (ii) embrace Verificationism. Barring (ii), we will distinguish evidential from conceptual questions regarding laws. And it is conceptually possible that  $e$  should be the unique instance of  $Lce$ , and the latter anyway be entailed by the explanation of  $e$ .

Granting determinism; granting general laws as entailed by determinism; accepting that determinism does not as such entail that anything is inevitable, then, it seems plain to me, it follows that inevitability must be explicated with reference to something other than the applicability of laws. And the chief defect in Beardsley's analysis is that it rests content with explicating inevitability *just* in terms of "non-accidental" laws. This is an ineffectual move, not, as Beardsley would suppose, because a critic might find the notion of such laws unacceptable, but because they fail to discriminate the inevitable from the merely determined. So, unless there are special *sorts* of laws appealed to in connection with inevitability, reference to laws alone will not give Beardsley his analysis. And though he does suggest, with his use of the expression "Inevitability Sentence," that there might be special laws, in fact his clarification shows that all he means is non-accidentally. And I should claim that a law is not explanatory if it is accidental, and hence non-accidental laws (if that expression is not redundant) are equally supposed in determinism. Indeed, if my argument has been correct, Beardsley is even wrong in supposing that the event which makes another one inevitable *is* related to it by law. For that would imply that it is amongst the determining conditions for that event. But the Tet offensive did not determine the withdrawal in making it inevitable. It rather incapacitated us in whatever way from interfering with the conditions which determined the event which it now was too late to prevent.

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### IV

It is no part of Beardsley's claim (nor of mine) that all events are inevitable, and indeed, such a claim would be very much stronger and very much less acceptable than the claim that all events are determined. Universal inevitability would mean that something always occurs which incapacitates us from preventing events we would prevent if we could. We *never* can prevent anything we want to, according to such a theory. But then, unless something quite mysteriously fatalistic is intended, such a theory is almost surely false. It is always a matter of circumstantial investigation which reveals whether an event was inevitable or not: that *e* was inevitable and that *i made* it inevitable are purely empirical questions, indeed historical questions, in every instance. So the concept of inevitability is consistent with some events being avoidable (and even avoided), with our being able to prevent them when we want to.

But the application of all of this to actions, apart from those actions which consist in actual prevention or attempts at actual prevention, remains to be analyzed. What, for example, does it mean to say that an *action* was inevitable, or that something made a certain action inevitable? If the troops are inevitably withdrawn from Vietnam, this entails that *someone withdraw them*. And withdrawing troops is an action. So if the event was inevitable, the *action* was inevitable. And how is this to work?

Presumably, an action is inevitable when the agent in question has no alternative rational choice, not even a choice not to choose. Any event which puts him in that kind of situation may be said to make his choice in that case inevitable. The Tet offensive was such an event if it left no rational alternative save to withdraw troops. We may suppose that the objective conditions which prevailed in the Vietnam conflict determined that we could not win. We might at various points in the development of the conflict have varied these conditions if we had had adequate knowledge of what would happen if we did not. But we did not have that knowledge, and perhaps our misconceptions were amongst the determining conditions: the case is very complex. The Tet offensive, then, if it indeed made withdrawal inevitable, did so because it was too late, once it had happened, for us to alter any of the conditions which determined our withdrawal. Even then, of course, there were alternatives. Only not *rational* alternatives, relative to our other attitudes and beliefs. Indeed, these attitudes and beliefs must be counted amongst the conditions which determined that we should not win. Had we been prepared, for example, to destroy the earth rather than lose, we could have prevented withdrawal. The religious forbearer from insulin would, in his terms, have similarly had no rational alternative, if fluid from the pancreas of a taboo beast would assure his eternal damnation. We explain human actions in part with reference to the beliefs held by their agents, these beliefs *rationally* determining them to act in certain ways and not in others. And it was relative to our beliefs that the Tet offensive made our action inevitable, supposing ascription of inevitability here to be correct. The question no longer was whether but when the troops would be withdrawn. The Tet offensive closed a door upon a counterfactual historical route it was too late to follow: "Down the passage we did not take — Towards the door we never opened — Into the rose-garden. . ."

V

Professor Beardsley has enriched the philosophy of history by introducing the concept of inevitability, which participates in the perspectives of science and literature at once. History is filled with moments which divide an open future from a closed, after which there is nothing left but to live out what has been made inevitable as though it were our fate. Sometimes, as in tragedy, the moment comes because of ignorance: had Oedipus *known* the man was his father, he would not have performed an action which made inevitable his fall and mutilation. I would hardly suppose that inevitability is always and logically co-implicated with ignorance in this way as it is with impotency and incapacity to alter things. But one remarkable fact about history is that it is able to give descriptions of past events which would not have been available to those who lived through those events, these descriptions being based upon events future to those of which the descriptions are given, and regarding which the actors could have no clear knowledge. That something made a later event inevitable is such a description. It marks an irreversibility in human affairs, a point of non-returning, a fatality revealed in retrospect, an unrecoverable opportunity, a fatality revealed in retrospect, an unrecoverable opportunity, powerlessness and loss.