



Determinism or Free-Will?

Chapman Cohen

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The truth is that beliefs do not always, or even usually, die with the conditions that gave them birth. Society always has on hand a plentiful stock of beliefs that are, like so many intellectual vagrants, without visible means of support. Human history would not present the clash and conflict of opinion it does were it otherwise. Indeed, if a belief is in possession its ejection is the most difficult of all operations. Possession is here not merely nine points of the law, it is often all the law that is acknowledged. Beliefs once established acquire an independent vitality of their own, and may defy all destructive efforts for generations. One may, therefore, agree with the first half of Professor Paulsen's statement without endorsing the concluding portion. The problem has not, so far as the generality of civilized mankind is concerned, disappeared. The originating conditions have gone, but the belief remains, and its real nature and value can only be rightly estimated by a mental reconstruction of the conditions that gave it birth. As Spencer has reminded us, the pedigree of a belief is as important as is the pedigree of a horse. We cannot be really certain whether a belief is with us because of its social value, or because of sheer unreasoning conservatism, until we know something of its history. In any case we understand better both it and the human nature that gives it hospitality by knowing its ancestry. And of this truth no subject could better offer an illustration than the one under discussion.

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