

CHAPTER V

DETERMINISM, FREEDOM AND SOCIAL ACTION

5.1 Theories of Social Action as Strengthening Our Position

In the present chapter we propose to illustrate our thesis with specific references to some aspects of the concept of social action. Our thesis has been that human life cannot be explained in purely deterministic terms — that no proper understanding of human life is possible if the elements of freedom in it are disregarded. Our thesis was elucidated with the help of compatibilism which pointed to the need for an avoidance of simplistic approaches to human life, viz., taking a stand either from one or from the other of the two ends of the spectrum. Our submission now is that a consideration of some of the aspects of social action would help us to clarify our view further.

The concept of social action seems contextually significant since it helps us to concretely analyse an abstract concept like human freedom. We are thus suggesting that the human situation can well serve the purpose of illustrating our view.

It is common knowledge that an understanding of man is facilitated by considering him as a member of society. When the search-light is turned on the individual, he is
seen reacting to situations, and surroundings which include fellow-beings. The concretization-attempt in regard to an analysis of man-in-society is by raising and answering the question as to how free man is. When viewed from an analytical angle, man is seen to interact with the society he is in. The realm of social action thus becomes a fruitful area of reflection for our purpose here, because most human actions are performed in a 'social situation'.

Our purpose in discussing social action is to draw out the subjective and objective factors present in it. In the context of our present discussion the subjective aspects would indicate the elements of freedom in human life while the objective aspects could be considered as pointers to the deterministic aspects. (It will become evident in the sequel that no rigid dichotomy is meant here — dichotomy either between the subjective and the objective aspects of life or between freedom and determinism).

Theories of social action have delineated these two aspects of man's life. Some thinkers like Weber have espoused views highlighting the subjective aspects of social action without neglecting the objective elements while others like Skinner (who have behaviouristic persuasions) 'play up' the role of the objective factors at the expense of the
subjective. Yet others like Schutz, present theories which integrate both the aspects of the phenomena of social action. We shall now consider briefly some of the salient aspects of the theories which are relevant to our discussion.

5.2 Subjectivist Theory – Weber’s View

Max Weber who classifies social relationships, distinguishes between traditional action (Weltanschaulich) and effective action (Zweckrational). According to him the various types of actions become meaningful only when there is an underlying subjective element in them. It is the subjective aspect which provides the mainspring for action, asserts Weber. The three modes of action, viz., positive overt activity, abstention from acting, and passivity, — all imply subjective factors. From this general explanation of action Weber proceeds to offer a precise definition of social action. He states:

Action is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (i.e. individuals) it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course.

1 T.B. Batterbury, J. Clinical, Bombay: George Allen & Unwin (India) Pvt. Ltd., 1972, p. 40. Absolute values determine these actions which are Weltanschaulich, while both the ends and the means are taken into consideration in Zweckrational action. 

(Part Notes 2 and 3 next page)
Like ordinary action, social action too involves overt activity as well as passive acquiescence, maintains Weber.

He points out that not all actions are social, even though they may be overt and performed in the company of other individuals. An overt action can be considered 'non-social' if it is directed towards some inanimate object. Even subjective attitudes are not considered 'social' if they are not oriented to the behavior of others. For instance, a 'religious action' like solitary meditation cannot be considered 'social'. It becomes 'social' only if it 'involves' other individuals, like in a mass or a congregation. All the same, not every type of behavior involving other individuals can be described as 'social'. It needs to be reiterated that the term 'social action' is made use of to refer to cases

(Foot Notes 2 and 3 of page 158)


3 Ibid.

4 Weber's view on this aspect of social action is similar to the one maintained by Znaniecki, who states: "...they are social actions clearly different from other actions which bear not upon man but upon material things, economic values, sacred objects and mystical power, objects of aesthetic appreciation, linguistic symbols or scientific theories, ... which intend to produce not human reactions but technical, economic, religious, artistic, literary, scientific results." (The Method of Sociology, New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1934, p. 107). Hence according to Znaniecki, only those actions which evince human reactions can be considered as social actions. The 'subjective understanding' involved in social action is brought out by this description of social action.
where the individual's behaviour is meaningfully directed towards others in society. Weber cites the example of a collision between two cyclists. From one angle it may be considered a natural event. On the other hand, their attempt at avoiding an accident, or the ensuing insults, blows and discussion would constitute 'social action'.

Social action thus requires that the 'reacting person' be conscious of several things other than the mere awareness of the other person. He should not be merely aware of the other individual, but should also interpret the other's behaviour. In other words, the individual involved in social action must also be conscious of the other person's reactions as well as behaviour. Thus the subjective aspect of social action is the hallmark of Weber's theory.


6 Ibid., p. 113. Social actions can even acquire a negative dimension, as in the case of a 'revolt'. (Revolt of youth, for example) See Znaniecki, Social Action, pp. 65, 410, and 451. (Quote in Emery S. Bogardus, The Development of Social Thought, New York: Longman's Green & Co., 1960, pp. 412-444.)

7 Ibid., pp. 113-114.

Weber draws another distinction between social action and mere action of the individual. He points out that social action is not identical with actions influenced by others or actions which are mere imitations. But Weber later admits that 'behaviour of the crowds' in 'imitations' of the actions of others stand on the infinite borderline of social action.
Weber further emphasizes that social action cannot be understood in purely objective terms, by bringing in the concept of Verstehen. He considers the subjective aspects as essential in describing individual action as well as the social structure. Through the concept of Verstehen or 'understanding' Weber points to the inner states of the individual such as motives, purposes and intentions. He emphasizes the role of motivation in the creation of the 'social world'. It is obvious that such a theory of social action refers to the deeper aspect of social living without precluding the objectively indeterminable aspects of social phenomena.

5.3 Objectivist Theory - Skinner's View

The behavioristic school of psychology considers that a reference to the external aspects alone is sufficient to explain human action. It denies the inner or the subjective aspects of human action altogether. More basically, the

8 Verstehen is an important word, used by Weber which means 'understanding'. It is also used to denote different shades of meaning such as 'subjectively understandable', 'interpretation in subjective terms', 'comprehension', etc. This technical term refers to the observation and theoretical interpretation of the subjective 'states of mind' of the actors. It also extends to the meaning of logical and other systems or symbols, a meaning which is usually thought of as in some sense 'intended' by a mind or intelligent being of some sort. *Vide*, Max Weber, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.
behaviourist questions the very existence of the 'inner world' of man. For the behaviourist, subjective concepts such as desire, want, motive and intention are of no scientific value for explaining human behaviour. 9

The behaviourist interprets every human action as a 'response' to a particular situation or 'stimulus'. In other words, man merely 'adjusts' himself to certain 'situations' and does not 'initiate' any action on his own.

Burrhus F. Skinner, the most articulate spokesman of the behaviourist school observes:

An even more common practice is to explain behaviour in terms of an inner agent which lacks physical dimensions and is called 'mental' or 'psychic'. It is obvious that the mind as the idea, together with their special characteristics, is being invented on the spot to provide spurious explanations. A science of behaviour can hope to gain very little from so cavalier a practice.

9 The founder of the school of Behaviourism, J.B. Watson writes: "Behaviorism claims that consciousness is neither a definite nor a usable concept. The behaviourist ...holds further that belief in the existence of consciousness goes back to the ancient days of superstition and magic...In his first efforts to get uniformity in subject matter and in methods the behaviourist began his own formulation of the problem of psychology by sweeping aside all medieval conceptions. He dropped from his scientific vocabulary all subject terms, such as sensation, perception, image, desire, purpose and even thinking and emotion as they were subjectively defined." (Behaviourism, Chicago: W.W. Norton & Co., 1930, pp. 1-6). In this passage, Watson has highlighted all the salient features of the behaviourist school of thought.
Since mental or psychic events are asserted to lack the dimensions of physical sciences, we have an additional reason for rejecting them.

From the foregoing statement it becomes clear that subjective explanations of human behaviour in the form of 'intentions', 'motives' and 'will' have no place in the behaviourist's schema.

By emphasizing the objective aspects alone, Skinner totally eliminates the elements of freedom from the sphere of human action. This is evident from his analysis of behaviour in terms of stimulus and response, making use of the concepts of **operant conditioning** and **operant discrimination**. Operant conditioning occurs in an organism when a particular kind of behaviour is followed by reinforcements.


11 Skinner cites the example of the pigeon and its 'behaviour' of raising the head above a given height. The pigeon undergoes operant conditioning if food is given to it whenever it raises its head above a certain height. Here, food is the reinforcer and presenting food when the response is omitted is the reinforcement. The function of such reinforcement is to strengthen the response by increasing its frequency. It has been noted that higher lines were crossed by the pigeons more frequently when presented with the reinforcer (in this case food) than in the absence of any 'incentive'. The probability of this particular behaviour (i.e., raising the head above a certain level) was found to be greater after the 'reinforcement' (of offering food as reward), than it was before the conditioning. (Ibid., pp. 63-66).
The same principle of operant conditioning is applicable to human behaviour, maintains Skinner. In the latter case, the environment and the consequences of past actions form the 'reinforcers'. Through the process of operant conditioning, the environment builds the individual to maintain a balance in their day-to-day activities performed within a given environment. Even when changes occur in the environment, such as the 'appearance' of a new friend, availability of a new job, or the development of new interests, the individual usually adjusts himself quickly by acquiring new responses and discarding some of the old ones.

Operant discrimination is the natural corollary of operant conditioning. Skinner asserts that 'discrimination' plays an important role in the control of behaviour since the probability of a response is altered by presenting or removing the 'discriminative stimulus'. More specifically, the probability in the frequency of the response can be increased.


As in the case of the pigeon experiment, the stimulus (the light) which evokes the response (i.e., the stretching of the neck) is followed by reinforcement (which is food). The process by which this comes about is called discrimination.

by presenting the 'discriminative stimulus. Negative reinforcers, similarly produce 'negative responses'. Skinner regards 'negative reinforcers' as 'aversive in the sense that they are things organisms 'turn away from'.' Thus by establishing discriminative stimuli, responses can be controlled.

The theory of social behaviour inherent in the above analysis is that changes in man's actions can be brought about by manipulating his surroundings. In more technical terms, it is maintained that behaviour is a function of variables. By studying the variables, behaviour can be studied. In holding this position Skinner is employing words which are generally made use of by physical scientists. 'Manipulating' variables is possible since the variables (present in physical phenomena) can be observed and analysed, according to the physical scientists. Skinner holds that the same principle holds good in regard to the social sciences as well, and as such, human behaviour can be successfully manipulated.


16 The act of drinking water, is an 'instance' of 'behaviour'. The conditions under which one drinks water are the variables. Raising the temperature of the room, making the individual perform some rigorous physical exercises, etc., are the conditions which create thirst in the individual and make him drink water. These variables can be manipulated. If these 'conditions' are produced by manipulating the 'atmosphere' (and the other variables, if necessary), the required type of
The sum and substance of the argument is that social behaviour too can be reinforced and conditioned, like individual behaviour. 'Social reinforcements' require the presence of other people, and is a result of personal mediation, maintains Skinner. From our point of view, it is important to note that draws a distinction between socially reinforced behaviour and behaviour reinforced by mechanical environment. The former is much more 'flexible' admits Skinner, than the latter, and it is also seen to vary from moment to moment, for it depends on the condition of the 'reinforcing' individual. The very fact that social reinforcement is 'flexible' (as admitted by Skinner) points to the presence of the subjective element in it, which Skinner fails to recognize.

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behaviour can be 'produced' and studied. The suggestion of Skinner here is that a knowledge of the variables directly helps to get a knowledge of behaviour itself. What is more, by manipulating the variables, the type of behaviour we want can be 'produced'. (See B.F. Skinner, "The Scheme of Behaviour Explanations", in David Braybrooke, ed., Philosophical Prob of the Social Sciences, London: Macmillan Ltd., 1970, pp. 42–

17 Skinner, Science and Human Behaviour, pp. 298-299

18 In a later work Skinner half-heartedly accepts the significance of the subjective factors by distinguishing between methodological behaviourism and radical behaviourism. While methodological behaviourism deals exclusively with 'external antecedent events', radical behaviourism considers even those events which take place in the 'private world' within the skin. Nevertheless, Skinner does not fail to question the nature of the object observed and the nature of the observations. (See his work About Behaviourism, London: Jonathan Cape Ltd. 1974, pp. 13-18).
then indicates the nature of social action. He states that conscious experiences arising from spontaneous activity which are directed towards another self, constitutes social behaviour. When social behaviour is 'antecedently projected' it becomes social action.\textsuperscript{22} He illustrates his view thus:

An example of the latter would be my turning my attention to another's consciousness in order to note what occurred therein. Here the goal of the act (Handlungszweck) is merely to understand the other person's subjective experiences, and the in-order-to motive ... is entirely exhausted in that goal. I do not go beyond the goal and seek to modify the other person's subjective experience.\textsuperscript{23}

The qualifying expression 'antecedently projected' signifies that the action is oriented towards the other person. It follows that action can be considered social, only if the other individual's subjective experiences (such as intentions, purposes, and motives) are taken into consideration.

Schutz emphasizes the subjective aspects by using the term 'social process', which would indicate that the social world is not 'ready made' but 'emerges' when certain changes take place in the form of interpersonal relationships. Thus
does not fail to recognize the substantial role played by the objective. The objective aspects refer to the meaningfulness of the social universe to the social scientist as an impartial observer. These objective elements facilitate the 'external' description of social action.

Schutz is critical about the behaviouristic approach since it totally denies the inner or the subjective aspects of human behaviour. For, intellectually understanding the social situation (or even understanding points of view opposed to one's own in regard to the assessment of a social situation) will not be possible by considering the 'objectively observable behaviour' alone. The behaviourist's assumption that the acceptance of the objective aspects of social reality entails the rejection of the subjective, is totally unacceptable to Schutz. In effect this signifies that Schutz does not obliterate the objective aspects from his theory but it intent on pointing to the vital need for appreciating the role played by the subjective aspects.

5.5 Implications of the Theories of Social Action for our Thesis

The foregoing analyses of social action highlight the interaction aspects of life in society. They are also highly suggestive of the complexity of social action inasmuch as they highlight the significance of the 'inextricable woverness' of
the personal and social aspects of human action. While the
former is evident from the subjective understanding (such as
intentions, purposes and motives discernible in the individual)
the latter is apparent from the situation of social inter-
action.

Our emphasis is that social action can be explained
only as incorporating the subjective — personal, as well
as the objective — social aspects. To the extent the
former and not merely the latter 'determines' life-patterns,
the scope for freedom remains undiminished. They must be
considered together in any meaningful explanation of social
action.

From the three types of views presented so far in the
context of social action, we arrive at the following conclu-
sions.

The deterministic stance of Skinner’s theory is not
acceptable to us since the complexity of human behaviour is
not given due consideration by it. While we do concede the
value of the various methods suggested by Skinner for under-
standing human behaviour, our difficulty in accepting his
theory stems from the fact it simplistically treats man as
a mere mechanism which only responds to stimuli, — having
no control over its responses. Man is much more complex
on a mere mechanism. Behaviourism adopts mechanistic terms to explain human life, but paradoxically it is less acceptable than mechanism itself. As Broad points out, there is an important difference between the problem of life and that of mind which makes behaviourism in psychology much less plausible than mechanism in biology. There seems to be no reason whatever to suppose that 'being alive' means any more than exhibiting... various forms of bodily behaviour... But the position about consciousness certainly seems to be very different. 25

Coming to a review of the concept of 'operant conditioning', it needs to be pointed out that it has its limitations. By definition, an 'operant' is an "emitted act which can be reinforced, conditioned or shaped only after it has spontaneously appeared." 26 But, we have to inquire as to what makes the act appear for the first time? 27 Skinner's scheme


27 Ibid.
Skinner does not offer any explanation as to why an organism should turn away from certain stimuli. 'Avoidance' would point to the subjective aspect of behaviour which Skinner fails to concede. The question 'why', regarding 'negative reinforcers' goes deeper into the structure of human behaviour, and the latter cannot be adequately explained save by taking into consideration subjective aspects like purposes, intentions and motives. Thus Skinner's 'reductive materialism' which emphasizes only the objective aspects of human behaviour, is not acceptable.

Though human life cannot be analysed and discussed in purely objective terms, it is not wholly subjective either. Such an analysis of human behaviour is equally untenable since it is tantamount to accepting mentalism pure and simple. Thus human behaviour and its extension — social behaviour, should be seen as incorporating within it both the subjective and the objective aspects.

Though Weber's theory does not totally deny the objective aspects, (of social action) yet the emphasis on the subjective aspects alone. The subjective aspect of social action is considered to be all-important in his theory. Schutz, on the other hand, presents a more well-blended theory of social action where both the subjective and the objective elements are given
their due.

Though Schutz lays great importance on the subjective elements in social behaviour, he does not dispense with the objective elements altogether. The objective aspects which are emphasized by some social scientists (like behaviourists) refer to the meaningfulness of the social universe, from the point of view of an impartial observer. It could also be conceded that it is only the acceptance of the objective aspects that renders description and explanation of social action possible. Thus a study of the objective aspects is essential, and it ought not to be considered unimportant.

But, we maintain that the social universe is not meaningful only to the social scientist (as the observer from 'outside') but also to be 'actors' (people in society) themselves. To concede the latter aspect means precisely the acceptance of the subjective dimensions of social action. In fact, the subjective aspect is not simply more important for understanding social action; it is crucial to an understanding of it.

Though behaviourism may be credited for giving us a description of what happens in society in terms of observable behaviour, it does not help us to understand what really happens in the social world. This aspect of social reality is well brought out by Schutz's statement. He writes:
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All scientific knowledge of the social world is indirect. It is knowledge of the world of contemporaries and the world of predecessors, never of the world of immediate social reality. Accordingly, the social sciences can understand man in his everyday social life not as a living individual person with unique consciousness, but only as a personal ideal type without duration or spontaneity. They can understand him only as existing within an impersonal and anonymous objective time which no one ever has, or ever can experience. Since the social sciences our social sciences never actually encounter real people but deal only in personal ideal types, it can hardly be their function to understand the subjective meaning of human action in the sense that one person understands another's meaning when he is directly interacting with him.

Thus Schutz's stress on the need for incorporating the subjective factors together with the objective factors in a theory of social action, to draw out the actual implications of social behaviour, is acceptable.

Our interest in the theories of social action proposed by thinkers like Schutz stems from the fact that by recognizing the deeper significance of the personalistic dimensions of human life, they in effect counter the suggestion that human life (life in society, in the context of their discussion) cannot be 'determined' wholly from without. Nevertheless, the objective aspects of the social process is not overlooked by them.