



Free Will vs. Determinism (Fatalism) in Catharine Beecher (1800-1878)

Therese Boos Dykeman

In the first chapter of *Common Sense Applied to Religion*, Catharine Beecher asserted that the third intuitive truth the Divine implanted in the mind, is that “THE MIND OF MAN IS A FREE AGENT” and so capable of choosing and causing its own will or volition. In the twelfth chapter, “The Will,” Beecher began: “the power of choice raises man to the dignity of an intellectual and moral being.” She continued, “Without this principle, he would be a creature of mere impulses and instincts” and “would be led captive with each successive desire, or be the sport of chances whenever conflicting desires were awakened,” for, life presents a “constant succession” of decisions regarding “securing happiness” and “avoiding pain.”

In the operation of the mind Beecher claimed a “foundation for two classes of volitions or acts of choice” which determines moral character: “specific” and “generic.” A *specific* volition, like moving an arm, is usually consequent to a general purpose, which is denominated a *generic* volition. *Specific* acts of will may be called *subordinate*, in that they are controlled by the *generic* act of will. As well, a *generic* volition may be subordinate to a higher or greater *generic* volition. Early on, employing common sense and reason, Beecher disposed of theories said to be designed by the Creator, that depravity is instilled in the newborn and that *election* determines redemption. Her theory later developed in part in her *An Essay on Cause and Effect in Connection with the Difference of Fatalism and Free Will* argued against such determinist theories as those of Joseph Priestley which deny “the power of a contrary choice.” Beecher pointed out that in all ages men believed “they had power to choose differently from what they have chosen,” and asked, why has free agency been denied in theory?

Primary Sources:

Beecher, Catharine E. 1839. *An Essay on Cause and Effect in Connection with the*

Difference of Fatalism and Free Will, in *Biblical Repository* 2.4 (October), 382-408.

Beecher, Catharine E. 1857. *Common Sense Applied to Religion; on, The Bible and the People*. NY: Harper & Brothers.

Dykeman, Therese B. & Rogers, Dorothy G. (eds.) 2002. *The Social, Political and Philosophical Works of Catharine Beecher*, 6 vols. Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, vols. 2-3.

Secondary Sources:

Rutt, John T. (ed.) 1832. *Collected Theological and Miscellaneous Works by Joseph Priestley*, 2 vols. London: George Smallfield.

Keywords:

choice, effect, fatalism, free agency, free will, generic volition, moral, principle, specific volition, Joseph Priestley