

# The dialectic of determinism and freedom in the works of Koestler and Sartre

Alfred Dandyk

In his essay *The Yogi and the Commissar II*, Arthur Koestler addresses the topic of "determinism and freedom". He sees the tension between these terms as a crucial aspect of the human relationship to the self and the world, which can be recognised, among other things, by the fact that this topic has been reflected upon time and again in history. It can be found, for example, in the Oedipus myth, in Christian theology and in the interpretation of scientific theories such as classical and quantum mechanics. In addition, one can speak of biological and social determinism with the associated problem of freedom.

According to Koestler, the tension between determinism and freedom arises above all from the paradox that no deterministic theory can change the fact that people always act in *practice as if* they were free. Koestler writes:

*Thus the very concept of determinism implies a split between thinking and doing: it condemns man to live in a world in which the rules of behaviour are based on "as if" and the rules of logic on "because". (Koestler, *The Yogi and the Inspector II*)*

Koestler writes by way of explanation:

*This paradox is not limited to scientific determinism - the Muslim who lives in a world of religious determinism is afflicted with the same mental split. Although he believes, in the words of the Koran, that "every man has his fate tied around his neck", he curses his enemy and himself if he makes a mistake, as if everyone is free to choose. (ibid.)*

The question is how to interpret this paradoxical split between theory and practice. Does it show that human practice is an illusion, or does it rather reveal a profound ambivalence of human existence? A special interpretation can be found in the Oedipus myth:

*The conflict reaches its conscious climax in the sublime myth of Oedipus the King. Oedipus apparently retains his freedom of will and nevertheless fulfils his predetermined destiny. The Parcae know that he would never freely choose to slay his father and marry his mother, so they seduce him to do so under false pretences. His 'freedom' is included in their calculation and therefore not worth much. However, it is significant that the fate is forced to grant man at least the illusion of freedom. (ibid.)*

The Oedipus myth reveals an interesting structure to explain the aforementioned paradox. There are obviously different levels of knowledge, namely the superior knowledge of the Parcae and the subordinate knowledge of man. Oedipus' fate is predetermined, but he knows nothing about it, instead acting within the framework of human reality according to his free will. However, the Parzen hold the thread of his life in their hands and guide him in such a way that, taking into account his "free decisions", he nevertheless fulfils the predetermined life plan of fate in the end. In short: Oedipus' free will is a reality on the human level and an illusion on the level of fate.

Since the superior knowledge of the Parcae is to be valued more highly, Oedipus' free will is *ultimately* an illusion. There is no real dialectic between freedom and determinism, but only a feigned freedom and a real determination. Basically, man is just a puppet on the thread of life of the goddesses of fate.

The Oedipus myth finds a scientific or pseudo-scientific interpretation in Freud's psychoanalysis, where the role of the overpowering Parcae is taken over by the so-called unconscious.

What is important in Koestler's sense is the fact that fate is at least forced to "grant man at least the illusion of freedom". This fact is probably to be understood as meaning that freedom and being human belong together. The illusion of freedom is an essential component of human reality in the context of this myth. Naked determinism, without the illusion of freedom, would be an inhuman world, a world without people, a machine world in which there are processes but no actions. It is, after all, a puppet theatre with an accompanying illusion of freedom and at least an imagined freedom of action.

Illusion is therefore an essential part of human existence. In a way, the myth supports the thesis of existentialism: *man is freedom*. In terms of the myth, you only have to add the addendum: And this freedom is an illusion. This amounts to the further thesis that man as an acting being is an illusion. This assumes that real action is only possible under the condition of the reality of freedom.

On the basis of existentialist axiomatics, however, Sartre would emphasise a further point with regard to the myth. If, on the one hand, the myth is supposed to be a model of real conditions, then on the other hand it is also a narrative about these conditions. But who is this omniscient narrator?

Let's assume that the narrator is a human being. Then a paradox arises, because in this case the human plays a double role: On the one hand, he moves on a level of subordinate cognitive ability, while the superior and for him unattainable cognition lies on the level of the Parcae. On the other hand, he is a superconsciousness, an Objective World Eye that overlooks both the subordinate and the superior levels of cognition.

The other possibility, that the super-consciousness is not a human being but a god-like being, does not help either. Because then there would have to be some kind of contact between this god-like being and human reality, so that the knowledge of the objective world eye can somehow penetrate human consciousness, which again undermines the idea of the subordinate cognitive ability of humans.

The necessary existence of the superconsciousness or the omniscient narrator therefore leads to another difficulty: it is the human being who makes himself a determined being in a self-referential and freely invented narrative.

In short: on the basis of existentialist axiomatics, man cannot escape his own subjectivity, regardless of which deterministic theory he adheres to. He will always encounter his own freedom as the basis of all deterministic narratives. This is the deeper meaning of the word "subjectivity" in Sartre:

*The word subjectivity has two meanings and our opponents play with these two meanings. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the choice of the individual subject by itself and, on the other hand, the impossibility for man to transcend human subjectivity. The second sense is the deeper sense of existentialism. (Sartre, Existentialism is a humanism)*

Sartre gives a clue to the interpretation of this approach elsewhere. His philosophy is known to be atheistic; however, he points out that existentialism would also be correct if God were assumed to exist. For the decisive point in existentialist axiomatics is the thesis that "existence precedes essence". It follows that even in the event that God exists and determines everything with his divine will, the ontological constitution of man is freedom, i.e. a lack of essential identity, so that he is embarrassed to interpret his own experiences and events in the world in freedom and abandonment. If he then decides to interpret everything in terms of divine determinism, this does not change the fact that he has made this choice in freedom. So if determinism is correct, then there is at least one being that breaks through this determinism: man. In this sense, Sartre can say:

*The basis of truth is freedom. (Sartre, Truth and Existence)*

One can also say that the basis of truth is free choice. This also has to do with the fact that, for Sartre, truth comes into the world with the emergence of man. It would therefore be wrong to identify the word "truth" with mere being-in-itself. Rather, truth is a certain relationship of man to the being-in-itself. Man lives in truth, i.e. by appearing in the world he allows a certain aspect of the being-in-itself to emerge by illuminating this being-in-itself through the choice of a certain perspective.

In this context, it is also important to reflect on the first meaning of the word "subjectivity". It reads: "Subjectivism means...the choice of the individual subject by itself...". According to Sartre, this interpretation of the word "subjectivity" is not wrong, but it does not capture the actual and deeper meaning of "subjectivity". For with the subjective choice, the individual simultaneously chooses the meaning of the world and thus also the meaning of the other. For from now on he will see the other person with the eyes of a religious person if he has made the appropriate choice. In other words: every self-design is also a world-design. That is the deeper meaning of the word "subjectivity".

This is not to say that being in the sense of being-in-itself is non-deterministic. It is simply not known. All we can say about being-in-itself is that it is what it is. Whether it is deterministic or non-deterministic is beyond human knowledge. In this respect, it

makes no sense to argue about it. We can only describe and analyse the respective situational level of knowledge in the context of human reality.

Being-in-itself is only accessible to people by choosing a perspective on this being-in-itself. The world is a representation of this perspective. God's world view is not accessible to him. However, it is given to man, on the basis of freedom, to invent the theoretical and practical instruments that enable him to explore the determinism or non-determinism of the world. This is obviously a dialectic of freedom and determinism, which is at the same time a dialectic of knowledge and non-knowledge.

According to Koestler, Christianity is now taking a decisive step towards the reality of human freedom. He writes:

*Christianity took the solution a significant step further. Human freedom is no longer an illusion, but a reality on the human level, while the deity is omnipotent, omniscient and completely determines the world on a superhuman level.*

*The dilemma has been exacerbated and at the same time resolved by projecting the spiritual split into nature. The universe itself has been divided into levels of human will and divine will (fate). The levels are in a hierarchical order, that is, the laws of divine logic are a closed book to the human mind, while the latter is an open book to the deity...The Christian world is disunified in the sense that different laws govern different levels - the divine, the human, the animal level. The logical contradiction between freedom and destiny has been resolved by attaching different kinds of logic to the different levels in the hierarchy. (Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar II*)*

The Christian solution is closer to existentialism than the story of the Oedipus myth, because in Christianity human freedom is not seen as an illusion, but as a reality. Christian man is not predetermined by fate and God is not a puppet master, but a wise and benevolent ruler of the world. Although the power of the Christian God is even greater than that of the Parcae, he is, so to speak, omnipotent, the connection between the human and divine levels is weaker, so that one can speak of a relative freedom of mankind. God is indeed omnipotent, but as the wise ruler of the world he only makes very moderate use of it.

The paradox of the super-consciousness does not exist in the Christian solution because the total ignorance of the Oedipus man is replaced by the revealed knowledge of the Christian man with regard to the existence of his Creator. Although man cannot fully comprehend God, he can touch him with his thoughts and thus gain an intuition of him. Descartes writes in this sense:

*The whole force of this proof lies in the realisation that I myself could not possibly exist with the nature that is peculiar to me - namely, being in possession of a conception of God - if God did not also really exist, the same God, I say, whose conception is in me, that is, who possesses all*

*the perfections which I cannot comprehend, but which I can touch, as it were, with my thoughts, and who is absolutely insensitive to weaknesses. (Descartes, Meditationes de prima philosophia)*

In this case, too, the omniscient narrator has an overview of both the human and the divine level, but this view is clouded because the connection between the two levels is not revealed to the omniscient narrator, who has become an "omniscient" narrator in the Christian solution. This is because divine logic is a closed book for both man and the narrator, while at the same time it is assumed that the totality of existence is an open book for God. Accordingly, there is only *one* objective world eye: God. The "omniscient" narrator, on the other hand, is only a human being to whom the possibility of touching God intellectually has been revealed by the grace of God. Consequently, the Christian solution provides an answer to the question of the function of this "omniscient" narrator.

But the Christian solution also recognises that the ontological constitution of human beings means that it is their free choice that determines the interpretation of world events within the framework of human reality. Regardless of whether he decides in favour of or against God, it is the individual who makes this choice in freedom and abandonment. In a certain sense, in terms of the meaning of the world, what Descartes attributes to God is attributed to man. In this sense, man's freedom is absolute, and it must be said that the individual bears full responsibility for the meaning of the world, whereby the word "world" refers to the world of the individual, in which, however, all other people are also involved.

Sartre's deeper meaning of the word "subjectivity" becomes apparent here once again. With my self-design there is also a world-design and with my world-design I engage all other people. If I choose the Christian solution, I see in the other person a creature of God. If he has fallen away from God, I see him as an apostate creature of God.

It is clear that the danger of totalitarianism arises in this context. Sartre's moral solution to this is his differentiation between the spirit of seriousness and the spirit of authenticity. The authentic person recognises that his view of the world is primarily a free design and, in an only questionable sense, an independent structure of being-in-itself. His concept of generosity arises from this analysis.

In the wake of Pascal, Descartes, Kepler and Newton, God became a mathematician. God's thoughts and laws became laws of nature, which were now to determine the text of determinism. God himself became superfluous. As a result, the distinction between the divine and the human level also became obsolete, because from now on there was only one level: that of nature. Koestler writes:

*The same laws governed the movements of atoms, stars, organic matter, the brain and its highest manifestations. (Koestler, The Yogi and the Inspector II)*

This is naturalism. It asserts that everything that happens in this world can be traced back to natural processes. The determining factors are causal chains that can be formulated mathematically. The world consists of atoms and the processes that take

place are ultimately nothing more than the play of the movement of atoms. Even thoughts, theories, are revelations of brain-physiological processes. The world as a whole is the self-contained totality of a physical system.

Accordingly, the contradiction between theory and human practice emerged once again:

*Scientific determinism, for example, was heading towards the same crisis as the religious determinism expressed in the Oedipus myth. Instead of being a puppet of the human-like gods, man became a physical-chemical automaton. Fate from below left just a little room for the experience of free choice as fate from above: the iron grip of heredity and the Umwelt was just as inescapable as that of the Parcae. (ibid.)*

Whether man is perceived as a puppet of human-like gods or as a physico-chemical automaton, the tension between theory and practice remains: In everyday life, man perceives himself as an acting being who makes plans and executes them. The cause of purpose cannot be banished from practice, regardless of what deterministic narratives claim.

Sartre's existentialism is a philosophy that takes this tension as its starting point, with the focus on practice. Theories, including all deterministic theories, are aspects of this practice. In this sense, dialectics as the "logic of freedom" and as the "law" of human practice is the centre of existentialism.

Sartre is an opponent of naturalism, for he writes:

*What we call freedom is the irreducibility of the order of culture to that of nature. (Sartre, Marxism and Existentialism)*

In other words, it is not possible to interpret culture as the result of a natural causal chain. The old split between theory and practice can be recognised here again. Naturalism is a theory, but practice recognises the distinction between nature and culture. The moon and the tides belong to nature, but literature, theatre, chess and football, theatre and fashion all belong to culture. It expresses human freedom, and its achievements are not due to the order of nature.

For example, it would be absurd to attribute the offside rule in football to a law of nature. Rather, it is a free invention of man. Consequently, naturalism cannot be justified for Sartre.

It is important to realise that Sartre takes people's experiences seriously and is not prepared to replace them with any scientific findings. Human practice has its own laws and the laws of nature are part of this practice. For example, when someone goes shopping, they unconsciously make use of the laws of nature, but they go shopping *because* they have a plan to have a party and want to prepare for it.

Sartre therefore distinguishes between "dialectical reason" and "analytical reason". Analytical reason is the reason of the natural sciences and dialectical reason is the reason of human practice, a logic of freedom. Analytical reason primarily applies the

cause of effect and dialectical reason the cause of purpose. Naturalism denies purpose-causation and postulates the omnipotence of effect-causation. It recognises no actions, only processes. In reality, however, human reality corresponds to a dialectic of cause-effect and cause-purpose, at least if one follows Sartre's philosophy.

Naturalists can of course claim that human culture is just an illusion and that in reality there is only nature. One could easily reply that natural science is obviously a cultural phenomenon; consequently, natural science is an illusion, as are all the results of natural science. A lot of nonsense can be produced in this way, so that such arguments cannot be taken seriously. However, there are also assertions that amount to there being only one meaningful cultural phenomenon: natural science (see Carnap).

However, Sartre's rejection of naturalism does not yet imply a rejection of determinism. For there are also determining factors that are not of natural origin, such as early childhood traumas or traditional imprints. Even free decisions can subsequently act as determinant factors. Consequently, cultural imprints can very well be understood deterministically. This shows that the relationship between culture and freedom is not as simple as Sartre's quote above suggests. Sartre writes:

*I am not "free" to escape the fate of my class, my nation, my family, nor to acquire my power or my fortune, nor to conquer my least desires or my habits. I was born a labourer, a Frenchman, with hereditary syphilis or tuberculosis. The story of my life, whatever it may be, is the story of failure. The adversity coefficient of things is such that it takes years of patience to achieve the slightest success. Moreover, one must "obey nature in order to be able to control it", that is, I must fit my actions into the meshes of determinism. Instead of "making himself", man seems to be "made by the climate and the country, the race and the class, the language, the history of the collectivity to which he belongs, heredity, the individual circumstances of his childhood, the adopted habits, and small events of life. (Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p.833)*

It is clear to see here that Sartre's philosophy is a dialectic of freedom and determinism. For he writes: "...I must fit my actions into the meshes of determinism." This is exactly what it is all about when it comes to obeying nature in order to be able to control it.

If man, in freedom and abandonment, decides that he absolutely must shoot a rocket to the moon (Wernher von Braun), then he must fit into the meshes of determinism. In other words, he must transform his body and the bodies of his employees into an instrument of Newtonian mechanics. The design is free, but the realisation of this free design follows the meshes of determinism.

The relationship between freedom and determinism is therefore much more complicated than one-sided world views suggest. It is therefore quite correct to state, in Sartre's sense, that man's free design to dominate nature has the unintended effect of turning himself into a robot. In this context, Sartre also speaks of "anti-dialectics". Sartre treats this problem under the term "dialectical circularity".

One specification of naturalism is dialectical materialism in Engels' sense. Insofar as dialectical materialism is also naturalism, Sartre rejects it. With regard to the question of whether nature is dialectical, Sartre remains cautious. He says that the current state of knowledge cannot justify such an assertion and that it is better to do without it for the time being. Sartre therefore limits the concept of dialectics to human practice.

There are many problems with scientific determinism. Firstly, there is the question of the omniscient narrator. He obviously sits enthroned above the atomic swarm of world events and, despite the confusion, sees himself in a position to speak of a general "determinism". The question is whether the narrator belongs to the physical system or not. If he belongs to the physical system, then the problem is how it can be that a physical system tells a story about itself. However, if it is not part of the physical system, then naturalism is invalid.

However, people are insightful enough to deny humans the ability to maintain an overview in this regard. This would require demonic abilities. Koestler writes:

*Some time ago Laplace thought that if a higher intelligence counted all the atoms and their velocities at a given moment, it could then predict all future events - up to the end of the world, including Mr Churchill's cigarette variety. (Koestler, The Yogi and the Inspector)*

In naturalism, the omniscient and omnipotent God becomes an omniscient recording and calculating machine. Determinism becomes a question of data and computing power. Man becomes just as superfluous as the omniscient God. In view of the fact that for Sartre, in Nietzsche's sense, man is the as yet unidentified animal, the danger of transhumanism lurks here. It is within the realms of possibility that man becomes the superhuman and that the superhuman is an omniscient and omnipotent robot. It is important to bear in mind that man in the sense of existentialism, i.e. man as freedom, is not a metaphysical a priori, but only a historical a priori. It has developed historically and it can also disappear again. It is Sartre's concern to fight for man in the sense of existentialism.

Another problem with naturalism is the question of whether the sciences themselves support this determinism. Newton already pointed out that two conditions must be met for mechanical determinism: The laws of nature and the initial conditions must be known. Even if the laws of nature are known, this is not sufficient for a deterministic world if the initial conditions are not known. However, these are based on God's freedom of choice. Thus - at least according to Newton's view - materialistic determinism is wrong because it is within God's freedom to constantly re-establish the initial conditions. Newton's famous dispute with Leibniz resulted from this approach. Leibniz said that God had set up the world like a perfect clockwork mechanism so that it would function deterministically by itself according to the eternal laws of nature. Newton, on the other hand, claims that God must always intervene in world events in order to prevent a collapse.

With the discovery of quantum mechanics, physics itself puts a question mark behind determinism. Koestler writes:



*The modern physicist naturally denies that it is his task to explain anything, and it gives him masochistic pleasure to set up formulae which denote with precision the degree of imprecision in his findings, that is, the inability of physics to describe, let alone explain, what is really going on in the physical world. (Koestler, The Yogi and the Inspector)*

Koestler alludes here to Heisenberg's uncertainty relation, which postulates a fundamental inaccuracy in physical measurements. For example, the position and momentum of a particle cannot be determined simultaneously with any degree of accuracy. It is also possible to violate the law of conservation of energy for a brief moment. Radioactive atoms decay spontaneously without it being possible to predict when they will decay. For example, physicists cannot explain why one of two identical radioactive atomic nuclei decays and the other does not. Determinism therefore also stands on shaky ground with regard to the natural sciences.

Sartre's dialectic of freedom and determinism is expressed in many formulations. Here are a few examples:

*My freedom is therefore condemnation, because I am not free to be ill or not ill, and because the illness comes to me from outside: it is not mine, it does not affect me, it is not my fault. But since I am free, I am forced by my freedom to make it mine, my horizon, my perspective, my morality, etc. (Sartre, Outlines for a Moral Philosophy)*

I am not free to be ill or not to be ill. My illness came from outside; I did not want it. It defines me; it determines me; it is the condition of my existence. I have to make it my illness, my horizon, my perspective, my morality and so on. In short: I have to shape my illness. But in this I am not different from a healthy person who also has to shape their life. The existential conditions of individuals are different, but that doesn't change the fact that everyone has to take charge of their own destiny, overturn it and transcend it. For every person, as long as they live, has a future and this future is their scope for freedom. This applies to both the sick and the healthy:

*Completely determined and completely free. Forced to take this determinism upon myself in order to set the goals of my freedom beyond it, to make of this determinism an additional commitment. (Jean-Paul Sartre, Sketches for a Moral Philosophy, pp. 756,757)*

"Making an additional commitment out of this determinism" is a good formulation of the concept of freedom in Sartre.

Sartre is regarded as a philosopher of freedom. This is certainly true, but perhaps it is more accurate to see him as a dialectician of freedom and determinism. The dialectic of freedom and determinism is at the same time a dialectic of knowledge and non-knowledge. Regardless of whether man is determined or not, in practice he is condemned to the freedom to design himself, to make a choice that corresponds to a self and world design.

Traugott König formulates the nature of this dialectic as follows:

*The leeway given to his free choice stems from the degree of ignorance of his determinacy: since he does not know how he is determined, he is forced to determine his determinacy by a choice that no one can take away from him;...(Traugott König, Afterword to Sartre's "What is Literature?")*

This correctly describes the "human condition". He does not know whether he is determined or not, and if he is determined, then he does not know *how* he is determined. This also explains the many different stories that circulate about determinism. They are an expression of the dialectic of knowledge and non-knowledge of man. In the sense of existential philosophy, man is a being characterised by an openness in his relationship to being. Openness in relation to being is just another expression of Sartre's slogan "Man is condemned to freedom."

To be continued