

IN REPLY TO HART AND HAMPSHIRE

In their recent article in *Mind*¹ Hart and Hampshire say: (1) "There is a kind of certainty about human actions, wants, likes and dislikes, which is different from the kind of certainty about these subjects that is based upon empirical evidence : it is a kind of certainty, or knowledge, to which the notion of evidence is irrelevant." Further, in discussing "a man's knowledge of his own present and future voluntary actions" they say : (2) "Our thesis is that there is a necessary connection between certainty of this kind, and on this topic, and deciding to do something..." At a later point, in discussing decision specifically, they claim: (3) "It is clear that a person's announcement of his intention to do some action in the future is not a prediction that he will do this action, although others may base their predictions upon such announcements made by the agent. That such statements are not predictions is evident from the fact that if the agent does not act as he says that he intends to act, this exposes him, not to the criticism that what he said was false, or that he was mistaken, but to the charge that he has "changed his mind"-assuming that he was not lying about his intentions. They say furthermore: (4a) that if a man says "I have decided to do X", this entails: "I am certain that I shall do X, unless prevented, or unless I fail by reason of circumstances outside my control", where the "certainty" mentioned is stated to be "non-inductive" certainty; (4b) : the minimum force of "I intend to do X" is: "I believe that I will try to do X if the occasion arises." Hart and Hampshire finally, after pointing out (5) the asymmetrical nature of 1st- and 3rd-person decision-statements and inferences as to future actions which may be drawn from them, admitting that any "certainty" we have about future events which is based on 3rd-person statements is purely inductive certainty, state categorically that a 1st-person decision to do something affords non-inductive (and, by implication, stronger), certainty that the action will be performed than 3rd-person, or inductive, certainty does. The purpose of this note is to point out that there is a fundamental ambiguity in the article concerning the sense in which Hart and Hampshire are using "certainty".

We commonly distinguish three kinds of certainty: (i) mathematical, (ii) logical, and (iii) scientific (causal or statistical) certainty. Now by "practical certainty" Hart and Hampshire certainly do not mean (i) or (ii) and deny that they mean (iii) (see quotation 1). The question therefore arises in what sense they are using the word "certainty". There is a possibility that they may be using the word in a new sense, but if so, it is not clear what this sense is. They do not claim to be using it in a new way: what they seem to be doing is to use it in two different established ways, which are in fact incompatible, in that one is inductive and the other non-inductive. The first of these (see quotation 2) is the philosophical, absolute sense (where they assume the incorrigibility of 1st-person statements about consciousness); the second is the sense in which "certainty" is equivalent to "certitude", defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "subjective certainty". Now certitude, when it concerns our future voluntary actions, is normally based partly on direct and incorrigible knowledge of the "absolute" feeling of certainty of decision, and partly on inductive evidence. Hart

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and Hampshire do not give an analysis of their term "voluntary act"; if it is taken to mean the goal, or final action envisaged, then any certainty (certitude) we have about this act will be largely inductive, and decision-statements referring to such acts will be predictions. Hart and Hampshire seem to be using the term in this sense, and yet to be trying to have some of the advantages of a different analysis, one which is not in fact available to them. This second analysis is the one in which "voluntary act" is taken to mean the momentary "act of free-will", with regard to which we can have certitude amounting to absolute certainty, just as we can have such certitude that we have made a decision (this certitude is the basis for the distinction drawn by Hart and Hampshire between 1st- and 3rd-person decision-statements). But certitude of this type is not confined to decision-statements: it is common to all honest 1st-person experiential statements. Furthermore, even though there be a non-inductive premiss (*i.e.* that I have made a decision to do X) in the argument whose conclusion is "It is certain that I will do X", the suppressed premisses are inductive statements concerning the laws of nature, including psychological laws; the conclusion itself is therefore inductive. Hart and Hampshire may admit that the conclusion is not purely non-inductive, but may claim that we have good non-inductive grounds for our certitude about the conclusion. But even if such grounds can be found, they do not make the certainty of the conclusion: "It is certain that I will do X" non-inductive, and in so far as they are predictions, such statements will be open to the familiar Humeian objections.

Before discussing the way in which Hart and Hampshire try to avoid such objections, it is interesting to ask why they should want to find grounds for denying the relevance of empirical evidence to decision-statements. Upholders of a free-will doctrine, rather than determinists, would, I think, want to claim a special sort of certainty in relation to decision-statements, as Hart and Hampshire are doing. They might not be prepared to say that we have free-will at all times, but would at least claim that there are many times when we can, by a free choice, direct our actions as we decide. Now if free-will is to be claimed at all, it is necessary that, at times when we exercise our free choice, we should do so consciously, and that we should have direct and incorrigible knowledge of what we are doing, in order that we may be held fully responsible for our voluntary acts. But in order to claim this incorrigible knowledge, and also to claim absolute certainty that our "act of will" will be followed by the appropriate voluntary act, a free-will theorist will have to distinguish between the voluntary instigation of a chain of events likely to lead to the desired result, X, and the later part of the chain, which is controlled causally. It is only over the first step of the chain that we can have control. The weaker form (4b) which Hart and Hampshire suggest has affinities with this free-will theory, in which the "voluntary act" is reduced to one step; thus "I will try to do X" could be interpreted as (4c): "I will set in action the causal chain (or chains) most likely to lead to X, and I will make an attempt to overcome obstacles, sub-conscious or external, which would prevent me from doing X". On this interpretation, according to which the "voluntary act" is to *try* to achieve the required result, it is perfectly legitimate to say that a paralysed man is performing a voluntary action if he is genuinely trying to move his leg, even though, in fact, no movement of his leg takes place. "Trying" may be regarded as a mental state, of which we can have 1st-person, incorrigible knowledge, and about

which we can make true statements which are not predictions; but a man's knowledge that he is trying to do X is not the same as his knowledge that he will achieve X. Even the statement (4c), which is only a part of what we normally mean when we say: "I have decided to do X", could be known with absolute, non-inductive certainty only at the moment of doing X, since any time-interval admits the possibility that I may change my mind. (It is not the case (see quotation 3) that, every time a person fails to carry out an action which he had decided to do (or to try to do), the explanation is that he has changed his mind; he may simply forget, or be prevented due to external conditions or sub-conscious resistances.) However, absolute certainty of such a limited kind is of little practical interest to us, mainly because, when we speak of "voluntary acts", we refer not only to the chain of events leading to X, but also to X itself. This is shown by the fact that a person may decide to do X, fail to achieve X, and yet claim, in retrospect, that he had done what he had decided to do: but in this case he will say, not "I decided to do X", but "I decided to try to do X, and I did". Of course, we do limit the range of the causal chain we are prepared to regard as included within the act: unforeseeable consequences are not so included, and the agent is not regarded as culpable with reference to such consequences. We even vary the range of the act according to the nature of the agent : a child is not held responsible for as many consequences of his free-choice as is an adult. But we do not, in practice, limit the process to one step.

Moreover, our decision-statements are further complicated in that reference to our future voluntary acts as described above is only a part of what we usually mean when we say: "I have decided to do X", and on a determinist view, is never part of our meaning. We generally imply that we think it likely that the obstacles will in fact be overcome. This is not clear from Hart and Hampshire's analysis of "I have decided to do X": they try to avoid Humeian objections by adding qualifications to the statement "It is certain that I will do X" (see quotation 4a) : and later weaken 4a still further-, to 4b. But 4a is equivalent to the tautology: It is not the case both that I shall do X, and that I shall be prevented from doing X, Surely, the only ways in which 4a says anything meaningful are: firstly, that when used in ordinary speech, the speaker implies that it is unlikely that he will be prevented-this is an inductive matter. Secondly, he implies that he does not wish to be prevented (if we say he *entails* this, we get into difficulties over remarks such as: "Well, all right, I'll do it; but I don't really want to"). On Hart and Hampshire's analysis, it would be quite in order for a sane man to say: "I have decided to walk through the sun", in spite of the fact that he would readily admit that he was hardly likely to succeed. In ordinary language, such a decision-statement would not be accepted as a serious remark if made by a sane adult, nor would the speaker himself be able to take it seriously. If a chain-smoker says, regularly, "I have decided to give up smoking", and never does, then - on inductive grounds - we cease to infer from his remark that he will in fact give it up. Even the speaker himself may not infer from his remark that he is likely to stop smoking, if he has already found from experience that the habit has a very great hold on him. If he does infer this, It will be because, as well as having made the decision, he has good inductive grounds for believing that he may succeed. It is because most of our decision-statements are based on inductive expectations of this kind, that it is misleading to say "I have decided to do X" when one does not really

think it likely that one will succeed. And this is one reason why 1st-person decision-statements may seem to involve a superior kind of certainty about the occurrence of the envisaged act, when compared with 3rd-person decision-statements; but the greater probability involved in the former statements is a probability based on inductive beliefs. The second reason is that only the speaker can be quite sure that he is not lying; this non-inductive certainty is not peculiar to decision-statements (although it is of special importance to anyone upholding a theory of free-will), and is apt to be confused with the certainty (certitude) one feels due to one's faith in the inductive principles involved in the realization of the required result.

Thus there is no intermediate kind of certainty, between absolute and inductive certainty, and superior to the latter, associated with 1st-person decision-statements. There is merely subjective certainty, or certitude, that there is a high probability that the agent will successfully achieve the intended act. Such certitude is composed of two elements: one, the incorrigible certainty common to all 1st-person experiential statements, but of special importance to opponents of determinism, and the other, inductive certainty, which is usually believed to be of a high probability in seriously-made decision-statements. This mental state of certitude may lead us to say that "I have decided to do X" entails "It is certain that I will do X"; but the certainty involved is largely inductive unless it is made of such a limited range (*i.e.* as referring to the momentary "act of free-will", the trying to do X) as to lose application in ordinary speech. For, in ordinary speech, the verb "do" usually means "achieve", rather than "try to achieve", and the required result, X, is included within the meaning of the term "voluntary act".

MARGARET A. BODEN
University of Cambridge