

# the meaning of freedom for george bancroft and john fiske

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Perhaps because “freedom” has been so obvious a part of the national creed, the meanings that the word has had for Americans have not often been closely examined. Yet “freedom” admits of many meanings, and it can be understood on at least several levels. The various deterministic ideas, from predestination to behaviorism, which have influenced the American mind, have been far better defined, but the relation between concepts of determinism and those of freedom in the United States has not itself been thoroughly thought out.

These terms tend, of course, to be abstractions, neither of which is sufficient as a practical belief. Champions of human freedom commonly mean no more than that there is a certain margin of an individual’s existence that is not determined, or that the individual should not be entirely controlled by human forces external to himself. It is perhaps easier to be a consistent determinist in the sense of believing all impulses and events to occur of necessity, but most American determinists have been willing to defend individual freedom in some sense from external human compulsion.

The problem is certainly a perennial one in western thought, but as is the case with some other social and intellectual problems, its terms seem to be cast in bolder relief in America. Extraordinary personal mobility, required by the project of civilizing a continent, translated easily for most Americans into personal freedom, as did values reflected in the slogans of national independence and popular participation in politics. At the same time, a continent devoid of the European web of traditions and institutions might offer little resistance to the play of cosmic forces; if the individual was mobile, he might be also adrift. Furthermore, emptiness cried for progress, and progress involved its own teleological determinism.

An attempt to clarify the relationship of freedom and determinism in the American mind might well start with the two nineteenth-century historians, George Bancroft and John Fiske. Belonging to different generations, and differing in their intellectual premises, they nevertheless arrived at conclusions which were sufficiently similar to delineate one significant American answer to the ancient riddle. Taken together, Bancroft and Fiske defined the role of freedom in a way that was not that of all Americans, by any means, but which was evidently acceptable to many. The two writers were both intellectuals and popularizers. They satisfactorily made the course of history intelligible to the broad literate public, Bancroft with a rationale drawn largely from German idealism and romanticism, Fiske by adapting the "synthetic," evolutionary philosophy of Herbert Spencer.

Bancroft and Fiske had in common the Calvinist strain of their New England background, bearing a relationship to their deterministic propensities which is difficult to measure. The case of Bancroft is particularly complex. The historian's father, Aaron Bancroft, was a Congregationalist minister who had rejected Calvinism in favor of a more liberal and Arminian theology. Yet as David Noble has emphasized,<sup>1</sup> George Bancroft was in turn a rebel—not against Calvinism but against eighteenth-century religious liberalism. He read Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will* as a Harvard undergraduate, and enthusiastically accepted the restatement in this "immortal treatise" (as he later called it)<sup>2</sup> of the Calvinist sense of the sovereignty of God and of man's subjection to His will.<sup>3</sup> Edwards remained his favorite theologian, and German idealism (for Bancroft an enlargement on the idealism of Edwards) did not prevent him from remaining an avowed Congregationalist who never deserted Trinitarianism and the divinity of Christ for the calm rationalism of the Unitarians.<sup>4</sup>

This religious disposition was reflected in Bancroft's historical writing. He rejoiced, in his *History of the United States*, that while America was "the chief heir of the reformation in its purest form," it was also "the least defiled with the barren scoffings of the eighteenth century."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Calvinism was for Bancroft the primary fountainhead of American liberty. He praised John Calvin himself as "foremost among the most efficient of modern republican legislators," who had made Geneva "the impregnable fortress of popular liberty, the fertile seed-plot of democracy."<sup>6</sup> The debt of America to the great reformer was clear.

The pilgrims of Plymouth were Calvinists; the best influence in South Carolina came from the Calvinists of France. William Penn was the disciple of the Huguenots; the ships from Holland that first brought Colonists to Manhattan were filled with Calvinists. He that will not honor the memory, and respect the influence of Calvin, knows but little of the origin of American liberty.<sup>7</sup>

The same attribution of American liberty to the pre-eminent champion of predestination was made by John Fiske. In a strictly religious sense, Fiske was a rebel against the Calvinist tradition, as Bancroft never was. He began to question the precepts of his orthodox upbringing at sixteen, by his own account, and was regarded as dangerously heterodox by authorities at Harvard College during his undergraduate days.<sup>8</sup> In the heat of his youthful rebellion, Fiske professed to loathe Calvinism with his whole soul; he had rather be a Buddhist than a Presbyterian, he wrote. "Calvin himself was about the most abominable old scamp that ever disgraced this mundane orb with his presence. I look upon him as a sort of incarnation of the Devil he talks about."<sup>9</sup>

The estimation of the mature historian was far different however. While not professing any personal enthusiasm for Calvin, whom he thought "despotic in temper," Fiske now, in language reminiscent of Bancroft's, granted him "a foremost rank among the champions of modern democracy." The promulgation of Calvin's theology, Fiske thought, "was one of the longest steps that mankind have taken toward personal freedom."<sup>10</sup> The place to which Fiske assigned Calvin's American heirs is clear from his histories. Summing up the American debt to Puritanism, Fiske thought it safe to say "that what is noblest in our history to-day, and of happiest augury for our social and political future, is the impress left upon the character of our people by the heroic men who came to New England early in the seventeenth century."<sup>11</sup>

Bancroft and Fiske took care to explain why they traced American freedom to these austere sources. Bancroft viewed Calvinism as a revolutionary doctrine which had denied the sanctity of tradition and broken up the political and ecclesiastical forms of the Middle Ages. Martin Luther, he thought, had "lifted each human being out of the castes of the middle age, to endow him with individuality. . . ."<sup>12</sup> Calvin went farther: he destroyed the authority of the medieval church by arraying against it the authority of the Bible; against the feudal aristocracy, "the plebian reformer summoned the spotless nobility of the elect. . . ."<sup>13</sup> In essence, Calvinist recognition of the absolute sovereignty of God purchased release from any earthly tyranny. Prostrating himself before Heaven, the Puritan nevertheless could only respect himself, whom God had redeemed, in relation to his fellows. All were equal, furthermore, who believed that God's will was to be done.<sup>14</sup> Above all, the Calvinist achieved a new degree of intellectual freedom. By denying the sacrament of ordination, he broke up "the great monopoly of priestcraft"; thenceforth he knew "no master, mediator, or teacher but the eternal reason."<sup>15</sup>

Fiske's interpretation was not substantially different. He was more alive than Bancroft to the actual intolerance of the early Puritans, but thought this an accident of their creed; thus bigoted Massachusetts could become the seedbed of liberalism. "In the darkest days of New England Puritanism," Fiske explained, "the paramount allegiance to reason was

never lost sight of; and out of this fact came the triumph of free thinking, although no such result was ever intended."<sup>16</sup> Calvinism, he agreed with Bancroft, had left the individual alone with his God; it had moreover heightened the sense of the infinite value of the soul until "all distinctions of rank and fortune vanished." Fiske added that the congregational church organization necessitated by the Calvinist lack of prelacy was one of the most effective schools for self-government which had ever existed.<sup>17</sup>

Bancroft and Fiske, then, believed the Calvinist tradition, including its Puritan offshoot in England and America, to be the major source of American freedom. But freedom in what sense? It is clear that they meant that Calvinism tended to free the individual from external human controls. Yet the example of Puritanism might have suggested the existence of other kinds of freedom: the free will which strict Calvinists rejected as Arminian, for example, and the freedom of a people collectively to choose their future, which hardly fitted the Puritans' belief that they had come to New England to carry out the will of God.

These varieties of freedom are not chosen here arbitrarily; besides being in themselves fundamental possibilities in human life, they were, in certain contexts, of significant concern to both Bancroft and Fiske. It will be useful at this point to define the three levels of freedom alluded to above: 1) freedom of the will in the sense of an ability within the mind to choose between alternatives without the choice being pre-determined; 2) freedom of the individual from external human control; and 3) the collective ability of men to shape their future according to their own free choice. There are of course an indefinite number of other types of freedom and an indefinite number of variations and refinements upon the ones stated; but these general types seem to serve best in defining the attitude of Bancroft and Fiske toward the concept, "freedom."

Only by an almost exclusive concern with the second level of freedom could the historians plausibly portray the Puritans as libertarians. In *The Beginnings of New England. Or the Puritan Theocracy in Its Relations to Civil and Religious Liberty*, Fiske celebrated at length the Puritan contributions to the liberties alluded to in the title, but he failed to touch on the doctrine of predestination, certainly for Puritans the ultimate limitation on human freedom. Bancroft did not ignore predestination—he was perhaps too much a student of Jonathan Edwards to do so—but it did not lead him to modify his interpretation of the Puritans as libertarians. Indeed, he described predestination as a weapon in the struggle against earthly privilege.

The political character of Calvinism . . . is expressed in a single word—predestination. Did a proud aristocracy trace its lineage through generations of a high-born ancestry, the republican reformer, with a loftier pride, invaded the in-

visible world, and from the book of life brought down the record of the noblest rank, decreed from all eternity by the King of kings.<sup>18</sup>

Having rendered mundane distinctions contemptible, the doctrine was expendable, and "New England, which had no hereditary caste to beat down, ceased to make predestination its ruling idea. . . ." <sup>19</sup> As to the third level of freedom, neither historian was disposed to pick a libertarian quarrel with the Puritans' anxiety to fulfill the mission which God had commanded of them.

The approach to the problem of freedom indicated by their treatment of the Puritans is confirmed by direct expressions on the part of Bancroft and Fiske. Considered on this more abstract plane, the positions of the two historians diverge sufficiently to indicate both continuity and transmutation between a historiography steeped in romantic suppositions and a later one which drew its inspiration largely from science. This is seen particularly with respect to the eternally perplexing question of freedom of the will. Nineteenth-century science tended strongly to reinforce the Calvinist interpretation, and allowed Fiske to take an untroubled stand as a consistent determinist. The message of romanticism was more ambiguous. Taken as a whole the romantic mood exalted the ego and the irrepressible freedom of the individual; yet in its idealist aspect it arrived at a monism which easily became deterministic. American transcendentalism, a school to which, despite his theological conservatism, Bancroft's ties were close, reflected this ambiguity. It offered a double image of man the self-reliant individual, who drew intuitively upon the wisdom of the Oversoul, and of man the tributary of the same oceanic Oversoul, lulled into a passive conformity with its rhythms and destined for Nirvana in its embrace.

Bancroft does not appear ever quite to have faced the issue squarely. He was inclined to fall back on compromises or evasions. In a youthful essay on "The Doctrine of Temperaments," he seemed to embrace a psychology midway between Calvin and Locke, arguing on the one hand the function of education in developing the mental powers of the infant, "in confirming its advantages, in counteracting its faults, in supplying its deficiencies, in tempering its elements," but insisting nevertheless on the limits of these possibilities. The basic features of the mind, Bancroft thought, were "fixed beyond the possibility of change." The vices to which the child would later be most susceptible were predetermined, no less than the virtues in which he would most naturally excel.<sup>20</sup>

This sort of compromise was plausible and apparently consistent, although not ultimately without difficulties. Bancroft sometimes seemed willing to concede to man a margin of freedom, provided that he did not interfere with the divine plan, as in a central assertion of his *History of the United States*: "Nothing appears more self-determined than the volitions of each individual; and nothing is more certain than that

Providence will overrule them for good. The finite will of man, free in its individuality, is in the aggregate subordinate to general laws."<sup>21</sup> This formula does not, however, give a clear answer to the question: is the individual will determined or free? Russel B. Nye points out that to be entirely consistent with his belief in the inevitability of progress according to divine plan, Bancroft would necessarily have rejected the idea of human free will. Nye cites Bancroft's conception of free will in a limited sphere as reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards.<sup>22</sup> Yet Edwards rejected free will except in the sense of the will not being constrained from acting on the motive which impelled it.

The point is important, because Bancroft never lost confidence in Edwards, whose philosophy he used on one occasion as a standard by which to measure George Ripley, in a dispute between Ripley and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

He was perhaps the unfittest man to take up arms against Emerson, for he admitted none of the special tenets of orthodoxy, not even the theory of the will as defined by Jonathan Edwards with the clearness of light, and now accepted by Huxley with all or most of his brothers in science, as well as by Calvinists of the new school and the old. . . .<sup>23</sup>

In the essay on the *Freedom of the Will* which had so impressed the young Bancroft, Jonathan Edwards had attempted to demonstrate that nothing happens without a cause and that the human will necessarily acts on the strongest motive. To suppose otherwise, with the "Arminian" champions of free will, was tantamount to supposing that the will acted indifferently and haphazardly (i.e., without motive). "For contingency is blind, and does not pick and choose for a particular sort of events," Edwards argued. "Nothing has no choice."<sup>24</sup> Such blind contingency, actually an enslavement to accident or chance, has nothing to do with moral choice; a moral action could be only that determined by a good motive. Motives operate by destroying freedom in the Arminian sense; they bring the will "into subjection to the power of something extrinsic, which operates upon it, sways and determines it, previous to its own determination."<sup>25</sup>

Edwards was not attempting to destroy the notion of freedom of the will, however, but to redefine it. He did this by distinguishing between the natural inability to do something and the moral inability to do it. It made no real sense, he thought, to speak of a man as unfree in any given situation, unless he lacked the natural ability to do what he would.<sup>26</sup>

But one thing more I would observe concerning what is vulgarly called liberty; namely, that power and opportunity for one to do and conduct as he will, or according to his choice, is all that is meant by it; without taking into the meaning of the word, anything of the cause or original of

that choice; or at all considering how the person came to have such a volition; whether it was caused by some external motive, or internal habitual bias; whether it was determined by some internal antecedent volition, or whether it happened without a cause; whether it was necessarily connected with something foregoing, or not connected. Let the person come by his volition of choice how he will, yet, if he is able, and there is nothing in the way to hinder his pursuing and executing his will, the man is fully and perfectly free, according to the primary and common notion of freedom.<sup>27</sup>

Bancroft seems to have accepted this explanation, although not without a sense of its inner paradox. He noted, apparently with approval, that most New Englanders rejected the notion of “free agency as breaking the universe into countless fragments,” and held instead that “every volition, even of the humblest of the people, is obedient to the fixed decrees of Providence, and participates in eternity.”<sup>28</sup> But Bancroft recoiled from the conclusion that the sovereignty of God had made mere passive slaves of men, and indeed, he knew that historically this had not happened in New England. The mind of the region “did not lose personality and human freedom in pantheistic fatalism.” Like St. Augustine or the ancient Stoics

it asserted by just dialectics, or, as some would say, by a sublime inconsistency, the power of the individual will. In every action it beheld the union of the motive and volition. The action it saw, was according to the strongest motive; and it knew that what proves the strongest motive depends on the character of the will. The Calvinist of New England, who longed to be “morally good and excellent,” had, therefore, no other object of moral effort than to make “the will truly lovely and right.”<sup>29</sup>

Bancroft saw no unbridgeable chasm between the Calvinism which he praised in his *History of the United States*, and the nineteenth-century idealist and transcendentalist school of which he was a part. No doubt one reason for his high regard for Jonathan Edwards was that Edwards represented for him a transitional phase through which Calvinism had passed in the mid-eighteenth century, and in which it had taken on a more benevolent and individualistic tone, better suited than the old Puritan dispensation to the genius of Bancroft’s own day. In particular, with Edwards, Calvinism had defined virtue as consisting in universal love, and secondly, it had “placed its final approval on the validity of internal intuitive judgment, accepting the doctrine that inward revelation of God, ‘being emanations from the infinite fountain of knowledge, have certainty and reality.’”<sup>30</sup> Little further translation was necessary, and none that did violence to Jonathan Edwards’ notion of the freedom of the will, for Bancroft to arrive at a transcendentalist sense of the in-

dividual's access to eternal truth, in which "the highest liberty consists in being forced by right reason to choose the best. . . ." <sup>31</sup>

John Fiske dealt with the problem of free will more explicitly than did Bancroft, but his conclusions were not essentially different from the Edwardsian position which Bancroft found congenial. To Fiske the question was an unnecessary and metaphysical one, which those with a "purely scientific point of view" regarded as thoroughly settled.<sup>32</sup> When will was considered as a dynamic process rather than as a mythical entity, it was absurd to characterize an act of will as either free or unfree. It was clear that men could "voluntarily determine their own actions," but equally clear that the chain of causation was not thereby broken. Indeed, liberty was incompatible not with causation but with its lack, which as for Edwards subtracted from men all moral responsibility and made man "the sport of a grotesque and purposeless chance." Understood as liberty of choice, freedom of the will could mean only "the power to exert volition in the direction indicated by the strongest group of motives. . ."; otherwise it would more properly be called "lawlessness of volition."<sup>33</sup> Fatalism was more akin to free will in this sense than it was to causation: "Each ignores causation; each is incompatible with personal freedom;" Fiske concluded, "the only difference between them being that the one sets up Chance, while the other sets up Destiny, as the arbiter of human affairs."<sup>34</sup>

Both Bancroft and Fiske, then, rejected the "Arminian" concept of free will; they admitted freedom of the will only in the Edwardsian sense of the will being free to act on its strongest motives. And as they rejected freedom on this first level of meaning, so they rejected it on the third level, the postulated collective freedom of people to determine their own future. In the cases of both men, this was because the uncertainties of freedom in this sense would threaten a teleological interpretation of history.

Bancroft's history, as is well known, was shaped by the philosophy which he acquired as a graduate student in Germany. From the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, Johann Gottfried von Herder and other German romantics and idealists, Bancroft fashioned a history that assumed the intuitive access to truth of the people at large, and the inevitability of progress which followed from this.<sup>35</sup> Romantic history, with its interest in "national genius," also allowed Bancroft to rationalize his sense of the special mission of the United States in furthering God's historical plan.

Bancroft left no doubt that man's destiny was shaped for him. "The moral world," he wrote, "is swayed by general laws. They extend not over inanimate nature only, but over men and nations; over the policy of rulers and the opinion of masses."<sup>36</sup> The historian was aware that there was "a pride which calls this fatalism, and which rebels at the thought that the Father of life should control what he has made."<sup>37</sup> Not

content with being created in the image of God, and with the ability to understand his counsels, those who succumbed to this pride desired, like Milton's bad angels, to act regardless of divine decree. This was inadmissible.

The glory of God is not contingent on man's good will, but all existence subserves his purposes. The system of the universe is as a celestial poem, whose beauty is from all eternity, and must not be marred by human interpolations. Things proceed as they were ordered, in their nice, and well-adjusted, and perfect harmony; so that as the hand of the skilful artist gathers music from the harpstrings, history calls it forth from the well-tuned chords of time. . . . All is . . . one whole; individuals, families, peoples, the race, march in accord with the Divine will; and when any part of the destiny of humanity is fulfilled, we see the ways of Providence vindicated. The antagonisms of imperfect matter and the perfect idea, of liberty and necessary law, become reconciled. What seemed irrational confusion, appears as the web woven by light, liberty and love.<sup>38</sup>

The nature and mechanism of this divine plan were described by Bancroft in his essay, "The Necessity, the Reality, and the Promise of the Progress of the Human Race," originally an address delivered before the New York Historical Society in 1854. The divine plan was, indeed, one of progress, and God had implanted the propensity for progress in human nature, which was itself immutable. Bancroft explicitly repudiated evolution in the biological sense at this time. Man bears, he thought, "no marks of having risen to his present degree of perfection by successive transmutations from inferior forms; but by the peculiarity and superiority of his powers he shows himself to have been created separate and distinct from all other classes of animal life."<sup>39</sup> Man was endowed with "the power of observation and generalization,"<sup>40</sup> amounting to a reason which had more in common with Transcendental intuition than with the shibboleth of the eighteenth century. "The progress of man consists in this, that he himself arrives at the perception of truth. The Divine mind, which is its source, left it to be discovered, appropriated and developed by finite creatures."<sup>41</sup>

Progress was inevitable for Bancroft, because truth was eternal and error was transient. Each individual, he thought, bears within himself not only his own personality, but the ideal man representing the race. He must always feel the contrast between the two, and in the normal course of events seeks to narrow the gap. Any proposition which he states must combine truth and error; he thus "sets in action the antagonism between the true and the perfect on the one side, and the false and the imperfect on the other; and in this contest the true and the perfect must prevail, for they have the advantage of being perennial."<sup>42</sup> As truth once discovered is never lost, Bancroft reasoned, it must ever accumulate at the expense of error. God is visible in the history that could document

this inexorable progress, but if this circumstance made the office of historian a noble one, it did not endow man with a greater ability to deviate from God's progressive program, should he foolishly wish to do so.<sup>43</sup>

John Fiske ruled out human control over the human future almost as effectively as Bancroft. Fiske employed a scientific rationale which was alien to his older colleague, but this rationale showed increasingly a religious coloration, and the essential character of Fiske's teleology does not seem from a twentieth-century vantage point to differ radically from Bancroft's.

Fiske began with the assumption that the sophisticated mind was compelled to believe in the necessity and universality of causation, i.e., that "every event must be determined by some preceding event and must itself determine some succeeding event."<sup>44</sup> There could be no compromise between chance and law, especially for the historian. If causation in history were denied, "all conception of progress, as well as all conception of order, is at an end. Thus the vast domain of History . . . becomes an unruly chaos. . . ."<sup>45</sup>

In his most ambitious work, *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy* (1874), Fiske attempted to make the law of history a function of the more general law of evolution, which the author derived in all essentials from Herbert Spencer. Social phenomena as much as any other, Fiske made clear, conform to law and could be studied scientifically; ". . . the fundamental law to which they conform is the Law of Evolution, which has now been proved to hold sway among inorganic and organic phenomena, as well as among those superorganic phenomena which we distinguish as psychical."<sup>46</sup> Fiske could therefore derive from a celebrated Spencerian formula "the Law of Progress":

*The Evolution of Society is a continuous establishment of psychological relations arising in the Environment; during which, both the Community and the Environment pass from a state of relatively indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a state of relatively definite, coherent heterogeneity; and during which, the constituent Units of the Community become ever more distinctly individuated.*<sup>47</sup>

Fiske was disarmingly ready to acknowledge that progress was not in the strict sense necessary or universal; it did not obtain everywhere at every time, or proceed at a consistent rate. "The theological habit of viewing progressiveness as a divine gift to man, and the metaphysical habit of regarding it as a necessary attribute of humanity," he said in a shaft that might have been directed at Bancroft, "are equally unsound and equally fraught with error. . . . Far from being necessary and universal, progress has been in an eminent degree contingent and partial."<sup>48</sup> But such prudent qualifications tended always to be lost in Fiske's desire to define a general scheme, and he remained convinced that "the

law of progress, when discovered, will be found to be the law of history.”<sup>49</sup> Fiske’s caution never seemed a match for his desire to affirm. Evolution and progress, he would point out, were not synonymous terms; the “survival of the fittest” was not by any means always the survival of the best, and could even result in a degeneration of type. Indeed, from a cosmic standpoint, progress might seem a local and transitory phenomenon. But Fiske would add that to a sufficient intelligence, “the appearance of fickleness in ‘cosmical weather’ would no doubt cease,” and a grand “dramatic tendency” be disclosed.<sup>50</sup> Fiske became increasingly confident that this would indeed be the case.

As his use of the term “dramatic tendency” indicated, Fiske did not believe the universe to be the work either of chance or of blind necessity, but of purpose.<sup>51</sup> Although conscious that Darwin’s theory of natural selection had overthrown the argument for God from design, he came to the conclusion that it actually would “replace as much teleology as it destroys.”<sup>52</sup> Fiske warned that phenomena were not scientifically explained simply by demonstrating that they had beneficial results, but he thought nevertheless that the doctrine of evolution was “not only perpetually showing us the purposes which the arrangements of Nature subserve,” but also indicated “a clearly-marked progress of events toward a mighty goal.”<sup>53</sup> The nature of this goal became increasingly apparent to Fiske. “Our historical survey of the genesis of Humanity,” he wrote in a late essay, “seems to show very forcibly that a society of Human Souls living in conformity to a perfect Moral Law is the end toward which, ever since the time when our solar system was a patch of nebulous vapour, the cosmic process has been aiming.”<sup>54</sup> This, as far as it went, was a goal with which George Bancroft could have been quite comfortable; indeed, as if to allay any pre-Darwinian fears for the dignity of man, Fiske noted that man considered as the end product of evolution was in as exceptional a theological position as he had been in more naive days.<sup>55</sup> Evolution simply made that position more secure from intellectual assault.

When free will and collective freedom have been in such fashion precluded, what of human freedom remains? Bancroft and Fiske were surprisingly reticent on this point, considering that “freedom” was for them both a primary end product of history. They assumed that what they allowed to remain of freedom was the only really meaningful freedom, but their attempts at definition were rare and abstract.

George Bancroft’s basic formula has already been cited: “The finite will of man, free in its individuality, is in the aggregate subordinate to general laws.” But what did it mean for the will of man to be free in its individuality? Bancroft easily grew lyrical in writing of the “principle of individuality,” which he considered the distinctive characteristic of American nationality. Strengthened by American isolation, by the struggles with nature and against absolutist and superstitious traditions, in-

dividuality “developed itself into the most perfect liberty in thought and action; so that the American came to be marked by the readiest versatility, the spirit of enterprise and the faculty of invention.”<sup>56</sup> This explanation hardly probed the depths of the problem. Somewhat more revealing was the rhetorical flight occasioned by the historian’s consideration of the Constitution.

The constitution establishes nothing that interferes with equality and individuality. It knows nothing of differences by descent, or opinions, of favored classes, or legalized religion, or the political power of property. It leaves the individual alongside of the individual. No nationality of character could take form, except on the principle of individuality, so that the mind might be free, and every faculty have the unlimited opportunity for its development and culture. As the sea is made up of drops, American society is composed of separate, free, and constantly moving atoms, ever in reciprocal action, advancing, receding, crossing, struggling against each other and with each other; so that the institutions and laws of the country rise out of the masses of individual thought, which, like the waters of the ocean, are rolling evermore.<sup>57</sup>

The sole guiding principle thus seems to be the freedom of the individual from external human constraint; the proof of freedom is individual mobility in a society to which Bancroft’s similes attribute an extraordinary amorphism.

Whatever the worth of Bancroft’s vision of freedom, he was confident that its growth was the purpose of the historical process. By an apparent paradox, freedom was “resistless”;<sup>58</sup> “the organization of society must more and more conform to the principle of FREEDOM.”<sup>59</sup> Divorced from any free human choice, the achievement of freedom could be incorporated into Bancroft’s general concept of progress as the achievement of a natural state. Freedom might well seem instinctive.

The absence of the prejudices of the old world leaves us here the opportunity of consulting independent truth; and man is left to apply the instinct of freedom to every social relation and public interest. We have approached so near to nature, that we can hear her gentlest whispers. . . .<sup>60</sup>

But if instinctive, freedom was not unconscious; the growth of freedom was the approximation of truth. “Every fallacy that man discards is an emancipation; every superstition that is thrown by, is a redeeming from captivity,” Bancroft wrote. “The tendency towards universality implies necessarily a tendency towards freedom, alike of thought and in action. . . .”<sup>61</sup>

Fiske was no less certain that the historical process led toward individual freedom,<sup>62</sup> although this conclusion was rationalized according to the Spencerian formula which derived coherent heterogeneity from

incoherent homogeneity. For Fiske, however, the formula supported a crucial distinction between organic and social evolution.

In organic development, the individual life of the parts is more and more submerged in the corporate life of the whole. In social development, corporate life is more and more subordinated to individual life. The highest organic life is that in which the units have the least possible freedom. The highest social life is that in which the units have the greatest possible freedom.<sup>63</sup>

Fiske found fault with Auguste Comte for his failure to recognize the distinction; Comte, he complained, had proposed as a social ideal a state which utterly failed to allow for individual freedom. Variations, Fiske pointed out, were always necessary for progress.<sup>64</sup> Absolute finality, moreover, was inconsistent with evolution, and the ideal state never could be reached, although it would be approached. This never-quite-attainable ideal state, unlike that of Comte, would be one in which individual freedom need not be infringed upon, for individual and social interests would coincide, "and every one shall spontaneously do that which tends towards the general happiness. . . ."<sup>65</sup> The spontaneously beneficial exercise of freedom which Fiske envisioned was perhaps not far removed from the instinctive freedom which Bancroft thought was already a force for progress in America.

Freedom viewed in terms of spontaneity or instinct seems a natural evasion for those of its champions who were not disposed to analyze it closely. And indeed, although George Bancroft and John Fiske made sufficiently clear the levels on which they believed man not to be free, their treatment of freedom as a positive quality was exceedingly meager. Bancroft did not go beyond his vision of freely moving atoms in a social mass; Fiske was even less articulate about the nature of the heterogeneous individuality which he believed to be the goal of evolution. In both cases, "freedom" tended to become a metaphysical abstraction.

This tendency toward abstraction appears to have arisen largely from an innate contradiction between the ideas of freedom and of progress which both Bancroft and Fiske espoused. As was natural for nineteenth-century American historians, freedom for them was a standard and goal of progress; yet as was equally natural in their time and place, progress was for them an objective and inexorable fact of human existence. The apparent result was paradox: history would compel men to be free.<sup>66</sup> If freedom was the point, moreover, toward which all historical forces converged, it is difficult to see how "freedom" could be other than a static situation admitting no deviation. A teleology of freedom, like any other teleology, must narrow human choice.

The solution of Bancroft and Fiske, essentially, was to define freedom as the individual's freedom from artificial external constraint, writing off free will (in the Arminian sense) as inadmissible because of the

logical necessity of universal causation, and sacrificing to teleology the freedom of men in the mass to alter their destiny. The historians were satisfied that the individual was becoming increasingly free to move where the strongest motives in his mind impelled him, while assured that a beneficent Providence was ordering the diverse movements of each to achieve the preordained movement of the many.

The intellectual climate of nineteenth-century America allowed Bancroft and Fiske to assume that the freedom of which they granted the reality was a significant—perhaps the only significant—kind of freedom. By the end of their century, and increasingly in the twentieth, this particular nineteenth-century solution to the problem of freedom would seem less adequate, at least to those prepared to admit a margin of freedom in the first place. To those attracted by existentialism, a concept of freedom which did not emphasize the personal reality of choice would lack meaning. For many more, an individual freedom divorced from the movement of society would seem seriously vitiated; a part of individual freedom, these would reason, is the ability to influence the course of society. The atomistic model of freedom must seem today rather hollow in conception and rather trivial in purpose.

Clearly, however, such a model plausibly satisfied intellectual needs in the nineteenth century. It is notable that it can serve as a common denominator for men, like Bancroft and Fiske, who were in other ways of quite different points of view. The case of these historians gives weight to the argument that the impact of Darwinian-Spencerian evolutionary thought on the United States was primarily to provide an additional rationale for old ways of thinking. Bancroft geared his teleology to a transcendentalist engine, and Fiske geared his to an evolutionary one, but the teleologies themselves, and the functions in them of “freedom,” did not substantially differ.

It cannot be said, of course, that the meaning that freedom had for Bancroft and Fiske was the meaning that it had for Americans in general, even in the nineteenth century. Free will was upheld by a greater thinker than either of the historians, William James, and was the characteristic theological assumption of the evangelical churches of the century. At the same time, reformers of diverse views assumed that men could shape the future of society. Yet considering the reputation and popularity of Bancroft and Fiske, it can be inferred that they did not define freedom in a way that seemed obnoxious or “un-American” to large numbers of their countrymen—as surely a definition that accorded no importance to freedom from arbitrary political restrictions, for example, would have seemed. Bancroft and Fiske may therefore provide some delineation of the bedrock American notion of freedom; they may also help to explain why micro-deterministic theories, whether of a lingering Calvinism or of a modern behaviorism, and macro-deterministic theories, such as the varieties of “Social Darwinism,” have found ready American audiences.

As a shibboleth, "freedom" has been regularly applauded in the United States, but as an idea it has admitted of considerable attenuation.

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## footnotes

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2. George Bancroft, "Jonathan Edwards," *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, ed. James Grant Wilson and John Fiske (New York, 1888), II, 311.
3. Russel B. Nye, *George Bancroft* (New York, 1964), 119.
4. Russel B. Nye, "The Religion of George Bancroft," *The Journal of Religion*, XIX (July, 1939), 230-233.
5. George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the Continent*, 6 volumes. The Author's Last Revision (New York, 1883), VI, 444.
6. George Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York, 1855), 406.
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8. John Spencer Clark, *The Life and Letters of John Fiske*, 2 volumes (New York, 1917), I, 294; Milton Berman, *John Fiske. The Evolution of a Popularizer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 30-38.
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11. John Fiske, *American Political Ideas Viewed from the Standpoint of Universal History* (New York, 1885), 27.
12. Bancroft, *History of the United States*, II, 403.
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14. *Ibid.*, I, 317-318.
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16. John Fiske, *A Century of Science and Other Essays* (Boston and New York, 1899), 145.
17. Fiske, *Beginnings of New England*, 58-59.
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19. *Ibid.*, II, 405.
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21. Bancroft, *History of the United States*, II, 269-270.
22. Nye, "Religion of George Bancroft," 228.
23. George Bancroft, "Holmes's Life of Emerson," *North American Review*, CXXXX (February, 1885), 136.
24. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven and London, 1957), 184.
25. *Ibid.*, 328.
26. Jonathan Edwards to John Erskine, July 25, 1757, *ibid.*, 457-464.
27. *Ibid.*, 164.
28. Bancroft, *History of the United States*, II, 407.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Nye, *Bancroft*, 131.
31. Bancroft, *History of the United States*, IV, 372.
32. John Fiske, *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy. Based on the Doctrine of Evolution, with Criticisms on the Positive Philosophy*, 4 volumes (Boston and New York, 1902), III, 255-257. Philip P. Wiener points out that "it was clear to Fiske that the heart of the problem of free will is not the imputing of necessity or fortuitousness to events, but the pragmatic question of fixing responsibility in moral and legal situations relative to given psychological, social and political conditions." Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), 133.
33. Fiske, *Cosmic Philosophy*, III, 268-278.
34. *Ibid.*, 272.
35. Nye, *Bancroft*, 110-112 *et passim*; Russel B. Nye, *George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel* (New York, 1944), 33-59.
36. Bancroft, *History of the United States*, II, 268.
37. Bancroft, *Miscellanies*, 490.
38. *Ibid.*, 490-491.
39. *Ibid.*, 483.
40. *Ibid.*, 488.
41. *Ibid.*, 484.
42. *Ibid.*, 485-486.

43. *Ibid.*, 511-517.
44. Fiske, *Cosmic Philosophy*, I, 217.
45. *Ibid.*, III, 276.
46. *Ibid.*, 241.
47. *Ibid.*, 328.
48. *Ibid.*, 285-286.
49. *Ibid.*, 287.
50. E.g., John Fiske, *Through Nature to God* (Boston and New York, 1899), 66-67, 79-85; John Fiske, *Darwinism, and Other Essays*. New Edition, Revised and Enlarged (Boston and New York, 1885), 102-103.
51. John Fiske, *The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge* (Boston and New York, 1885), 166-167.
52. *Ibid.*, 158.
53. *Ibid.*, 159.
54. Fiske, *Through Nature To God*, 112.
55. Fiske, *Century of Science*, 111-112.
56. Bancroft, *History of the United States*, VI, 442-443.
57. *Ibid.*, 443.
58. *Ibid.*, 7.
59. Bancroft, *Miscellanies*, 513.
60. *Ibid.*, 423.
61. *Ibid.*, 515.
62. See e.g. John Fiske, *The Destiny of Man Viewed in the Light of His Origin* (Boston and New York, 1884), 94.
63. Fiske, *Cosmic Philosophy*, III, 327-328.
64. *Ibid.*, IV, 28, 351-352.
65. *Ibid.*, 358.
66. Orestes Brownson early pointed out some of the difficulties of Bancroft's position. In an 1841 article Brownson criticized Bancroft for failing always to keep distinct in his mind the freedom of the people as the body politic, and their freedom as individuals. In 1852 Brownson concluded that Bancroft, in denying contingency and free will, fell into the historical trap of universal fatalism. Brownson's critiques are discussed by C. Carroll Hollis in "Brownson on George Bancroft," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XLIX (January, 1950), 42-52.