

LIBERTY OF DECISION IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

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The recent crisis of Christianity is in close relation to the false interpretation of the concept on human dignity, related to the general public conviction and separated from the Perfect Goodness, that is God, Who designates man's dignity in the right use of the appropriately interpreted liberty. Therefore, man's misinterpreted dignity in the euphoria of its spurious glorification, is manifested in the separation of liberty of choice from the liberty of decision, the dismissals and ignorance of responsibility and commitment. Nevertheless, man's dignity is established in the likeness to the Divine, and the execution of liberty is ensured just by accomplishing the likeness to the Divine and following Christ's lead because only in this way is man able to properly express his similarity to the creating and governing, or rather redeeming God both in the form of free choice and decision, which is directed to God.

The question of liberty frequently occurs in recent thinking; however, liberty is treated mainly as an exemption from compulsion and liberty of choice, though the completeness of liberty is attained entirely by accomplishing the liberty of commitment and decision. St. Thomas Aquinas, the well-known Christian philosopher of the Middle Ages devoted several works to the question of liberty, and dealt with it from both philosophical and theological points of view. He treats the freedom of man, free acts of God and those of angels, as well. This writing is going to examine St. Thomas' considerations on the liberty of man.

St. Thomas Aquinas deals with liberty in various works, primarily treating it in the context of his ideas on will as an intellectual power. The

question of liberty is presented in the writings of the Angelic Doctor as “Whether liberty is an act of the intellect or the will?” Before providing his conception on liberty, first we shall render a brief survey on the views exerting on St. Thomas and serving as a source of his ideas, then a systematic exposition of the author’s teaching on liberty, and finally—in accordance with the interest shown nowadays towards this question—the practical consequences of his doctrines. Therefore, our topic will be discussed by implementing a historical and a phenomenological approach.

HISTORICAL REVIEW

The concept of “liberty” in its original sense implies some political and social meaning.¹ In the ancient Greek world, nobles were used to be called free men (*eleutheroi*), that is, men, respected as free citizens of the society. In the ancient Roman Empire, one born from a free one was considered as “free” (*liberi*). The concept of liberty was first mentioned by Plato, who treated it as a rational idea, since Plato in this respect shared the opinion of Socrates.² Aristotle, however, did not accept the aforementioned doctrine of his master. Aristotle handles the concept of freedom by approaching it from the point of the will, but not of the intellect. In his context, liberty is adapted as a sufficient (active) decision (*proairesis*), and its concept is clearly made distinct from the concept of *boulesis*, signifying an insufficient (passive) volition. Though Aristotle distinguishes the act of intellect from the act of will, since he positively asserts that it is the intellect, which apprehends and chooses, whilst decision is bound to the will, he does not distinct definitely the act of will from spontaneity, so his approach seems to be rather intellectual in this aspect. In its recent meaning it seems to appear first in the terminology of the Stoical philosophy as a free act of will with individual characteristics (*liberum arbitrium*), thus contradicting to the pre-determinedness of the voluntary act. The Greek concept *autexouthion*, which has been translated into Latin as *liberum arbitrium*, actually denotes the control over our own self or the dominion over our own acts. Another considerable philosophical trend of the Hellenism,

¹ Cf. *Leute* in German, *люди* in Russian, that is: “people”, more properly: free members of a human association called as “people”.

² *Omni peccans est ignorans* ‘sin arises from lacking the knowledge of the necessitated truth’—that is, Plato considered the concept of liberty from the viewpoint of reason, as if suggesting that the lack of knowledge of truth deprives man’s liberty.

the Epikureism was committed to fatalism, that is the pre-determined determinism of destiny.

The Christian thought raised a new aspect of liberty, namely in the context of supernatural faith (*fides supernaturalis*) and the Divine Providence (*providentia divina*). The doctrine of the Divine Providence (cf. *pronoia*), represented by the old Fathers of the Christian Church, namely in personal context, contradicts to the pagan doctrine of a non-personal/impersonal providence, for the heathen thinking professed a kind of impersonal divine providence. Furthermore, the Fathers of the Christian Church regarded human freedom as one deriving from the Divine essence, more precisely, it occurs as participation in the Divine liberty (as an equivalent of the Divine essence). According to Boethius, liberty can be revealed not in the will, but in the intellect since man can be considered free³ on the base of the will's judgement.

Christian philosophers, immediately preceding St. Thomas Aquinas, e.g., St. Anselm of Canterbury, represented the voluntarist aspect, since discussing liberty, he emphasized the moral content of this concept. On the contrary to Anselm, Peter Abelard — similarly to Boethius — seemingly preferred to the intellectual approach. Abelard supposes that free will can be discovered in the act of judgement. The great Christian thinker of the 12th Century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux exposes liberty by distinguishing three forms of it. He differentiates a liberty from misery (*libertas a miseria*), foreshadowing in the future, a liberty from sin (*libertas a peccato*), which is attributed to the saints, and a liberty from necessity (*libertas a necessitate*), which is peculiar of the Divine liberty. St. Bernard suggests that liberty is a proper power of the soul, and it pertains not merely to the intellect or the will, but it belongs to both of them. The concept of Peter Lombard is very close to the aforesaid aspect, saying that free will is the act as much of the intellect so as of the will.⁴

It is manifest on the base of the brief review foregoing that the Scholastic philosophers of the Middle Ages were to handle the question of liberty as follows: Whether free will is founded in the intellect or the will? The contemporary intellectualists thought that this power is hidden in the intellect, whilst the voluntarists regarded will, as the locus of this faculty.

³ Cf. "liber, de voluntate iudicium".

⁴ "Et facultas rationis et voluntatis."

*THE CONCEPT OF LIBERTY BY THE CONTEMPORARIES
OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS*

The Scholastics predecessors of St. Thomas had different opinions about the free will. St. Albert the Great (Albertus Magnus) stated that the differentiated potentiality of liberty pertains to the will, since intellect itself judges of its own object (towards which it is tended), while will is adhered to the object judged true by the intellect. Will executes the action judged by liberty (*liberum arbitrium*), so free will seems to be a distinguished faculty/power of the soul. Alexander of Hales—preferring the voluntarist aspect in this subject—supposes that free will is a universally commanding potentiality,⁵ and only in a wider sense can it be treated as a rational potentiality, whilst in a narrower sense it is a differentiated faculty. Another Franciscan Friar, St. Bonaventure regarded liberty as nothing else but the dominion of the agent (operator), ruling over its own act, and he rendered the meaning of rational judgement (*iudicium rationis*) to the word of *arbitrium*. According to St. Bonaventure, free will (*liberum arbitrium*) is a distinguished power since it is a habit, implying the concurrence (*concursus*) of two mental potentialities, namely the intellect and the will. In his opinion, the practical judgment of the intellect does not succeed the theoretical judgment of the intellect at all the times, moreover, the latter depends on the former judgment. In this sense, St. Bonaventure seems to gravitate definitely to the voluntarists.

*THE DOCTRINE OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON FREE WILL
IN HIS VARIOUS WORKS*

As the brief historical review has explored above, the problem of liberty earlier had occurred in relation to the liberty of will, and the Angelic Doctor—similarly to it—discussed it in this context so as to follow a middle course between the intellectual and voluntarist approach.

1. St. Thomas Aquinas in this work treats free will as the proper power of the soul, being situated between the intellect (*intellectus*) and the will (*voluntas*); nevertheless, it is directed by the intellect, that is, according to *Liber Sententiarum*⁶ free will is not a differentiated potentiality, but it is ought to be adapted as a liberty from necessity (*libertas a necessitate*). In St. Thomas' opinion, the act of election (choice) pertains to will,

⁵ “Potentia universaliter imperans.”

⁶ 1 II. dd. 24, 25.

though will is guided by the intellect. St. Thomas in this work did not definitely preferred intellectualism or voluntarism.

2. In his writing, *De Veritate*,⁷ St. Thomas decided in favour of the intellectual approach, describing essence as free will by the free judgement of the intellect.

3. In the writing, *Summa contra Gentiles*,⁸ the Angelic Doctor accomplished his doctrine included in *De Veritate*, and outlined his principal statements concerning with the liberty of will by exposing it towards non-determinedness (*indeterminism*). In this work, the question is raised from the point of the acting cause, and St. Thomas deals with the acting principles of free voluntary actions as intrinsic forms (but not extrinsic, proper for “celestial/heavenly bodies” (*corpora caelestia*)), and furthermore he underlines that God has endowed the individual substances (but not animals) with individual will.

4. In the text of *Summa Theologica*,⁹ St. Thomas seemingly followed the voluntarist approach. In Q. LXXXIII, article 1, he definitely proves that man has free-will. He says the following: “Foreasmuch as man is rational, it is necessary that man have a free will.”¹⁰ According to him, man acts under the direction of the intellect’s judgement. Nevertheless man can be considered free since free is one that is cause of itself in the sense that it is cause of its own self, though not in an absolute manner, as it is true for God, Who can be regarded as the cause of Itself in a proper sense, that is not in a participated, analogous sense. Furthermore he inquires what the principle of the action is. He responds that will is the immediate cause of the action, while God is the farther/distant cause, though God always moves human will in the direction of a free act.

In Q. XIX, article 3, St. Thomas observes the liberty of God, saying the following: “We should respond that God desires creatures of conditional but not an absolute necessity.”¹¹ He inquires in Q. XIX, article 10: “Whether the will desires anything of necessity?” The Angelic Doctor answers: “No. Only through the certitude of the Divine Vision this sort of liberty can be assumed in the case of man.”

⁷ Q. XXII. 6, 15 Q. XXIV. 1–7.

⁸ L. II. c. 81. 82. 83. L. II. c. 48. L. III. c. 73. 85–90. L. IV. c. 22

⁹ Q. 19. a. 3, 10. Q. 59. a. 3. Q. 82. a. 2. Q. 83.

¹⁰ “Et pro tanto necesse est quod homo sit liberi arbitrii ex hoc ipso quod rationalis est.”

¹¹ “Respondeo dicendum est quod non absolute, sed hypothetica (ex suppositione) necessitate Deus vult creaturas.”

We read in Q. LXXXIII, article 1: “Whether man has free-will?”¹² St. Thomas in his work, *De Veritate* — sharing the intellectualist approach — responds the following: “Inasmuch as man is rational, it is necessary that man have a free-will.” In this context our author plainly asserts that as much as the intellect observes the basic principles, so the will regards the ultimate end and the Perfect Good, and desires to connect to it. And though in a distant sense it is God, Who moves (ordains) the will, He does not prevent the action being free but rather is He operates in it as a free power/capacity of the soul. Will desires of happiness as his natural end independently of God, as well; nonetheless, man is endowed with free-will since he has a natural appetitive power (*appetitus naturalis*) and a disposition (*dispositio*) to link up with this end in a manner so that these dispositions should be guided by the intellect. The man’s automatically conditioned habits (*habitus*) only turn, but not determine him to execute free actions/deeds.

Choice (election) is the act of the intellect according to St. Thomas, as he inquires it in the same Quaestio, article 4: “Whether the free-will is other faculty, different from the will?”¹³ The Angelic Doctor renders a negative response declaring apparently, that the intellect and will are in a proportionate correspondence in the following way: “The appetitive faculties must be proportionate to the desired objects, e.g. the “appetitive power” is proportionally adjusted to the desired thing, which moves it.”¹⁴ In correspondence with it both will and liberty are to be considered as appetitive powers. Since the activity of the intellect implies nothing but the apprehension of the rational principles, furthermore, the intellect manifests the comprehension of conclusion as an end, so as volition the apprehension of an end, that is the apprehension of an object, and finally choice manifests the comprehension of one object (regarding it from the other aspect). So, according to the aforementioned doctrine, St. Thomas declares that will, as an appetitive power (*potentia appetitiva*) and free will are not two powers, but one.

5. In the work, *Summa Theologica I–II*, the Angelic Doctor primarily deals with the act of choice. After exposing the concept of free voluntary act (*actus elicitus*) and distinguishing it from the concept of the commanded/coerced act (*actus imperatus*), in Q. IX, article 1 he inquires the following:

¹² “Utrum homo sit liberi arbitrii?”

¹³ “Utrum liberum arbitrium sit alia potentiae et voluntate?”

¹⁴ “Vis appetitiva proportionatur apprehensivae a quo moveatur.”

“Whether the intellect moves the will?”¹⁵ He responds the question affirmatively: “Yes, just as reason moves will, because will tends to its object according to the order of reason.”¹⁶ In article 3 of the same Quaestio, he inquires: “Whether will is able to move itself?” He renders a positive answer saying: “It is a possibility for as much as will follow in the same act both the end and necessary means, as well.”¹⁷

The Angelic Doctor asserts, and moreover, retains the liberty of the will, saying in article 2 of the same Quaestio: “Whether the will is moved by its own object of necessity?”¹⁸ He renders a negative response because from the viewpoint of the subject—regarding the exertion of liberty—the act of the will cannot be moved by any object of necessity, but taking into consideration special liberty (from the point of the object), it seems that will is moved of necessity, though the aforementioned necessitated motion of the will can be ordained exclusively by the Perfect Goodness. But if the object of the will is imperfect, the motion of the will is not of necessity either. At this point he connects the question of choice to the course of his thoughts. In Q. XIII, article 1 he inquires: “Whether choice is an act of will or of reason?” The Angelic Doctor seems to place the act of choice not in the reason, but the will, saying, as follows: “Choice (election)—regarding it materially—is an act of the will. But regarding it formally, we should consider it an act of the intellect.”¹⁹ St. Thomas here concludes that choice is an act of will, because this act (the act of choice) can be considered as the incidental/collateral form of the will.

St. Thomas in Quaestio XIII deals with the question of free choice,²⁰ and inquires the following: “Whether choice is to be found in irrational animals?” He expresses an objection because—in his view—choice (*electio*) presupposes a sort of undeterminedness, and in this respect it excludes determinedness (peculiar of animals). In article 3 he asks: “Whether choice is directed only to anything concluding to an end,²¹ or an end itself can be the object of choice?”²² St. Thomas gives an affirmative answer, because in his opinion not only means, but an end

¹⁵ “Utrum voluntas moveatur ab intellectu?”

¹⁶ “Intellectus movet voluntatem, sicut praesentans et obiectum suum.”

¹⁷ “In quantum voluntas cum eodem actu et finem, et media necessaria vult.”

¹⁸ “Utrum voluntas moveatur necessitate a suo obiecto?”

¹⁹ “Electio materialiter est actus voluntatis, sed formaliter tamen actus rationis est.”

²⁰ Cf. Quaestio XIII, a. 2.

²¹ Cf. cause of means to an end.

²² “Utrum electio sit tantum eorum quae sunt finem, an etiam ipsius finis?”

can be the object of choice. However he adds that the ultimate/final end never can be the object of choice, because the ultimate/final end is always a fundamental principle, but not a conclusion. In opposition to it an act of choice simultaneously judges the action, resulting at the same time in a conclusion. “Whether choice tends only towards potential things?”²³ St. Thomas renders an affirmative response because in his opinion, the potential conclusion cannot be derived from the potential basic principle. In article 4 we read: “Whether we choose only of what we will do?”²⁴ The Angelic Doctor answers positively because in his concept we ourselves act in any action. When we choose, we accomplish it through an action. In article 6 of the same Quaestio he asks the following: “Whether man chooses of necessity or freely?” His answer is affirmative: Man acts freely, though he desires the ultimate end of necessity, but in the created world, where creatures share the Divine existence only in an analogous, participated form, will is able to prefer to the particular and several inferior things instead of the ultimate end. According to St. Thomas, will in this respect is endowed with liberty. And finally, in article 6 he inquires: “Whether sin contains an act?”²⁵ In the response, the Angelic Doctor sets out the essence of sin. In his opinion sin is nothing but the lack of a morally required good deed.²⁶ In this respect he declares that the concept of sin includes some negative meaning.²⁷

6. St. Thomas Aquinas in the writing, *De Malo*, raises the question of what moves the will. In the response he points out that will is moved to act by an end, though will is also moved to the thing, being inclined to an end.²⁸

According to St. Thomas, will—if it acts freely—always includes some indeterminateness (indetermination), and approaching to it from the point of subject this indeterminateness is the source of liberty both from the aspect of subject and object, as well. Object—if observing it in its own—does not determine will, though the object, as a partial end, can exert a significant influence on the operation of free-will. On a larger scale, we ought to admit that God, as the primal cause of any action and an ultimate/final end of any act, moves creatures freely

²³ Cf. Q. XIII, a. 5.

²⁴ “Utrum electio sit tantum eorum et quae nos agendum?”

²⁵ “Utrum quodlibet peccato sit aliquis actus?”

²⁶ “Privatio actus moraliter debiti.”

²⁷ “Omissio considerationis regulae.”

²⁸ “Ad quae finem.”

in an absolute manner, though He never determines human actions but concurs with human nature, and thus—in St. Thomas' doctrine—there prevail both the Divine liberty and particular liberty of man. God governs/ordains this world through the law of nature created by Him, which implies that God universally guides the liberty of man as well, providing the autonomy of the human free-will because the Divine governing power (*gubernatio divina*) cannot be in contradiction with the law of nature created by Him, moreover, it ought to be presupposed.

SUMMARY

Summing up the aforementioned, we can assert that free-will appears in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas as the special potentiality of the soul, since from the point of view of the will, liberty is moved towards an end in an indetermined manner, whilst from the point of view of the intellect, it is directed to the partial goodness through the act of choice. It is the universal good, that is, the ultimate/final end, which is desired of necessity by the will, though in the finite world the option of choice or refusal is prevailed, since intellect is able to apprehend the ultimate end only obscured, in a kind of vague, but being assisted with the act of supernatural faith, it is able to comprehend it more clearly, whilst the will endeavours to reveal the Perfect Goodness, that is God, in the partial goods as well.

It is evident that in relation to liberty, the question of man's moral responsibility is raised when man acts freely in this world, since according to St. Thomas, any act of choice is the act of the intellect at the same time. In this context, man's dignity, properly characterised with liberty, appears in an imperishable form. Though man's liberty must not be interpreted as a free, unconditioned liberty, but only in an analogous sense of similitude and particularity, in a dependence from the Divine liberty, for the execution of liberty of choice is always imperfect. We ought to remember that any choice is tended towards some kind of decision, in which choice temporarily calms and loses its importance, since both the intellect and the will tend to acquire the possible best—even in the context of particular goods and ends—that is any choice in its power (*virtualiter*) indicates a sort of decision, so we may state that the liberty of decision—even in the case of particular and incorrect decisions from the aspect of the act of decision—tends to manifest the perfect, Divine liberty because any decision hides the perfect liberty of God, which man shares. But it depends on man's moral

responsibility to what extent he lets this share/participation predominate and be accomplished by the attained end. Both man's intellect and will are responsible for whether he allows the ordained ultimate end, that is, the possibility of acquiring the eternal beatitude to become effective in his life.

The recent crisis of Christianity is in close relation to the false interpretation of the concept on human dignity, related to the general public conviction and separated from the Perfect Goodness, that is God, Who designates man's dignity in the right use of the appropriately interpreted liberty. Therefore, man's misinterpreted dignity in the euphoria of its spurious glorification, is manifested in the separation of liberty of choice from the liberty of decision, the dismissals and ignorance of responsibility and commitment. Nevertheless, man's dignity is established in the likeness to the Divine, and the execution of liberty is ensured just by accomplishing the likeness to the Divine and following Christ's lead because only in this way is man able to properly express his similarity to the creating and governing, or rather redeeming God both in the form of free choice and decision, which is directed to God.

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