

## ETHICAL AND METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE REJECTION OF DETERMINISM BY AQUINAS

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In this article, an attempt is made to show how freedom is possible. The objection that Divine Providence and its opposite, scientific or physical determinism, make freedom impossible is examined. The question is raised as to whether the universe consists of things (beings/substances), which is a presupposition of scientific determinism. The order in the universe is held not to be an objection to freedom. It is argued that the future is not determined on the basis that causes refer to the past, not the future. Freedom would appear to depend on the soul not being determined like a stone, but a self-mover. In addition, intellect appears necessary, since freedom requires choice, which in turn requires the capacity to deliberate. If both soul and intellect are required for freedom, it is understandable that human beings alone in the universe are free.

The problem of freedom is one that has tested the minds of some of the greatest philosophers over the centuries, including Aristotle, Kant and St. Thomas Aquinas. The problem may be divided into two parts, firstly, the question whether human beings are free at all, and secondly, if they are free, which actions are free and under which conditions. In this article I aim to concentrate on the first part of the problem.

As St. Thomas points out, there are a number of objections to the possibility of human freedom. It would appear that human beings are not free, because God's foreknowledge and Divine Providence mean that human free will is an illusion. Again, it might appear that human beings are not free, because for everything human beings decide a cause

can be found.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, there is the *a priori* reasoning, which is formulated as follows by Voltaire: “It would be very strange if all of nature, and all the stars obeyed eternal laws, and if there was one little animal, one metre seventy tall, who was independent of these laws, and could always act as he wished according to his own pleasure and caprice.”<sup>2</sup>

If human beings are to be considered free it is necessary to reply to each of these arguments. I will claim in this paper that only a metaphysical argument can provide an adequate reply. But let us turn first to the field of ethics.

In the field of ethics the great philosophers mentioned above have put forward *a priori* arguments in favour of human freedom. According to Aristotle the aim of life and of ethics is happiness, and, in order to achieve happiness, human beings must act according to the moral and intellectual virtues.<sup>3</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes that human beings are free to act or not to act as required by their ultimate final cause. We choose the means to our end voluntarily.<sup>4</sup> Virtue and vice depend on ourselves.<sup>5</sup> Man is the source and father of his actions as he is the father of his children, and the origins (ἀρχαί) of his actions are within himself.<sup>6</sup> Again, in the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle writes:

Hence it is clear that all actions (πράξεις) of which man is the first principle (ἀρχή) and controller (κύριος) may either happen or not happen, and that it depends on himself (ἐφ’ αὐτῷ) for them to occur or not, as he controls (κύριός ἐστι) their existence or non-existence. But of things which it depends on himself (ἐφ’ αὐτῷ) to do or not to do, he is himself the cause (αἴτιος), and what he is the cause (αἴτιος) of depends on himself (ἐφ’ αὐτῷ).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It would seem that the 24 objections to human freedom given by St. Thomas in *De Malo* 6 can be reduced broadly to these two main objections.

<sup>2</sup> Voltaire: *Le Philosophe Ignorant*, Ch. xiii: “En effet, il serait bien singulier que toute la nature, tous les astres obéissent à des lois éternelles, et qu’il y eût un petit animal haut de cinq pieds qui, au mépris de ces lois, pût agir toujours comme il lui plairait au seul gré de son caprice.”

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my book *Dio e Contemplazione in Aristotele, Il Fondamento Metafisico dell’ “Etica Nicomachea”*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1999: 150–151.

<sup>4</sup> *NE* III, v, 1113 b 3–5.

<sup>5</sup> ἐφ’ ἑμῖν: *NE* III, v, 1113 b 6–7.

<sup>6</sup> *NE* III, v, 1113 b 17–21; *Met.* E(VI), i, 1025 b 22–24.

<sup>7</sup> *EE* II, vi, 1223 a 4–9. On Aristotle’s firm belief in free choice, cf. further R. Sorabji: *Necessity, Cause and Blame. Perspectives on Aristotle’s Theory*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980: 233–238.

Thus it is clear that Aristotle held that human beings are free, i.e., that he rejected the notion that human beings are causally determined.<sup>8</sup> However, the only justification given by Aristotle in the ethical works is *a priori*. He argues that human beings must be free because we blame and praise people and punish them. We do not do so in those cases where people are unable to act otherwise. Kant was also unable to offer anything better than an *a priori* argument for freedom, namely as a postulate of the practical reason.

St. Thomas also argues *a priori* that human beings are free, where he writes in *De Malo*:

If there is nothing free in us, but the change which we desire comes about by necessity, then we lose deliberation, exhortation, command and punishment, and praise and blame, which is what moral philosophy is based on.<sup>9</sup>

Thus three of the greatest thinkers, Aristotle, Kant and St. Thomas put forward an *a priori* argument to show that human beings must be free. However, against this *a priori* argument there is the *a priori* argument of Voltaire that it is very unlikely in the vast universe that only one little animal 1,70 metres tall should be free.

In order to examine the situation further let us see, firstly, how St. Thomas explains freedom. According to St. Thomas the human will is a faculty of the soul and differs from the sensitive appetite, because the will desires the good as such or the good in general (*bonum sub communi ratione boni*), whereas the sensitive appetite desires the particular objects of desire presented by the sense. The will necessarily desires the good in general, which is the last end or happiness (*beatitudo*).<sup>10</sup> This

<sup>8</sup> G. Fine: 'Aristotle on Determinism. A review of Richard Sorabji's *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, *The Philosophical Review* 90, 1981: 561–579 writes: "When Aristotle says that voluntary actions have an internal origin and are up to us, he does not imply a break in causal necessitation at any point" (p. 577). However, Fine's Stoicising interpretation of Aristotle (cf. *ibid*: 578) is certainly at variance with Aristotle's meaning. For Aristotle human action is not necessitated (or 'caused' in the sense of 'causally necessitated'). Cf. P. L. Donini: *Ethos. Aristotele e il Determinismo*, Turin: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1989: 57: [sc. Aristotle] "È inoltre convinto [...] che, se fosse vero che tutto avviene necessariamente, la deliberazione e l'iniziativa dell'uomo perderebbero ogni senso" (18 b 31–35).

<sup>9</sup> *De Malo* 6: "Si enim non sit liberum aliquid in nobis, sed ex necessitate movemur ad volendum, tollitur deliberatio, exhortatio, praeceptum et punitio, et laus et vituperium, circa quae moralis Philosophia consistit." Likewise *STb* Ia, 83, 1; *SCG* III, 73, 2411.

<sup>10</sup> *STb* Ia, 83, 1: "[...] naturaliter homo appetit ultimum finem, scilicet beatitudinem. Qui quidem appetitus naturalis est et non subjacet libero arbitrio [...]"; cf also *De Malo* 6, *ad* 6.

necessity proceeds from the will itself, i.e., it is a necessity of nature (*necessitas naturalis*) and is not due to external force (*necessitas coactionis*).

Freedom is possible because the intellect has not got that clear vision of God as the infinite good and only source of happiness, which would be needed to determine the will.<sup>11</sup> In other words, in heaven there could be no free will, because the goodness of God exercises too powerful an attraction on the human intellect for it to be possible for man to will anything except God. But in this world the connection between happiness and God is not so steadfastly clear to man that he is unable to will something other than God.<sup>12</sup>

In regard to the first objection against the possibility of human free will (*libera voluntas*),<sup>13</sup> namely that Divine Providence makes free will an illusion—often referred to as theological determinism—, St. Thomas replies as follows. He holds that the freedom, which we know about *a priori*, is manifestly not infringed by Divine Providence, although Divine Providence is at work in everything.<sup>14</sup> It is the will that acts, although change is initiated by God.<sup>15</sup> There is no inconsistency in holding that God makes human beings free by arranging that they function independently of the determining agency of other created beings.<sup>16</sup>

St. Thomas holds that “God lays down necessary causes for the effects that he wants to be necessary, and he lays down causes that act contingently—i.e., that can fail in their effect—for the results that he wants to be contingent.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, there is nothing to prevent an omnipotent God from willing human freedom. It may be noted that there are rather few philosophers at the present time who would

<sup>11</sup> *STb* Ia, 82, 8 *ad* 1; *De Malo* 6 *ad* 7.

<sup>12</sup> *STb* Ia, 82, 2; *De Malo* 6 *ad* 9.

<sup>13</sup> B. Davies: in his ‘Introduction’ (p. 35 n. 103) to *Thomas Aquinas, On Evil*, transl. R. Regan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, denies that Aquinas uses the expressions free will (*libera voluntas*) and freedom of the will (*libertas voluntatis*). This is a rather astonishing assertion, since Aquinas uses both expressions on many occasions both in relation to God and to man, as a glance at the *Index Thomisticus* shows. The source of this error seems to be a misinterpretation of A. Kenny: *Aquinas on Mind*, London & New York: Routledge, 1993: 75.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *De Potentia* III, 7 *ad* 13; *Comm. in Lib. I Sent.* XLI, 1, 3: “ad tertium dicendum, quod praesentia non est causa voluntatis, quia voluntas libera est [..].”

<sup>15</sup> *De Malo* 6, *ad* 3; *STb* Ia, 83, 1 *ad* 3.

<sup>16</sup> *De Malo* 6 *ad* 21; *Comm. In Peri Herm.* I, 14.

<sup>17</sup> *In Peri Herm.* Bk. 1, *lectio* 14, 22: “[..] ad effectus enim, quos voluit necessarios esse, disposuit causas necessarias; ad effectus autem, quos voluit esse contingentes, ordinavit causas contingentem agentes, id est potentes deficere [..].” Cf. J. R. Lucas: *The Freedom of the Will*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970: 75.

see Divine Providence as an objection to the possibility of human freedom. While most of these philosophers — and indeed most people living in modern western society — would not deny the existence of God, they seem to place God more or less in the situation of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover or the gods of Epicurus. Epicurus did not deny the existence of the gods, but held that they are in no way concerned with the world. In the contemporary world it is clear that scientific or physical determinism has taken the place of Divine Providence as an objection to freedom in the thought of St. Thomas. Thus the treatment by St. Thomas of Divine Providence—and his concern to show that it does not interfere with human free will—provides a perspective, which is the opposite of that of contemporary society.

In regard to the second objection to human freedom, namely that of scientific or physical determinism, the question arises as to whether the world is made up of causes or of things that act as causes, and whether man simply undergoes the influence of these causes, and whether his apparently free decisions are not in reality just the outcome of these causes.

In reply to this standpoint it is important to recall that Aristotle in Book Z(VII) of the *Metaphysics* says that living beings are what we call substances in the first place.<sup>18</sup> They are the best examples of substances. As is well known, Aristotle also writes in Book II of the *Physics* that art imitates nature and completes the work of nature.<sup>19</sup> When a human being uses his intellect to build a house, he is imitating the action of a bird, which builds a nest without intellect. When a human being develops a weapon to defend himself, he is imitating the natural mechanism of self-defence used by the animals, which do not possess intellect. When human beings develop the art of medicine, they are completing the work of nature, by which all living beings try to cure themselves from illness.

Thus living beings are the best example of substances. All of the artefacts invented by human beings are imitations of living beings, in the sense that they are not living, but possess a unity, a purpose, and a certain duration of existence, which is comparable to that of living beings. Hence artefacts are substances in a more remote sense that

<sup>18</sup> *Met.* Z(VII), vii, 1032 a 15–19; Z(VII), viii, 1034 a 4. Cf. my article 'The Concept of Substance and Life presupposed by Christianity', in: R. P. Francis and J. E. Francis (eds.): *Christian Humanism. International Perspectives*, New York: Peter Lang, 1995 : 187–199.

<sup>19</sup> *Phys.* II, viii, 199 a 15–17; II, ii, 194 a 21–22.

living beings. Human beings also substantify or reify parts of nature such as a mountain or a field or an ocean. But these concepts possess a far lesser degree of unity and hence can only be considered substances in an even more remote sense.<sup>20</sup> Aristotle did not believe that they are substances, as is seen by the fact that he did not consider the world to be a substance.

If the overwhelming majority of things or beings in the universe are only substances in the second or third degree because they have been developed by the human intellect, which imitates nature, it would therefore be totally anomalous to hold that these same beings which were developed by the human intellect were at the same time causes, the interaction of which makes human freedom impossible. It cannot be the case that the human intellect is the source of most of the things or causes in the universe and at the same time is deprived of freedom by being the passive object of the interaction of these causes.<sup>21</sup>

Again, it is important to point out that the order in the universe cannot be used as an argument against free will. The order in the universe has been the most important argument for the existence of God throughout the centuries. It made a strong impression even on Kant and has achieved fresh popularity recently with the emergence of the anthropic principle. The argument from the order in the universe against free will would be that God had established such a manifestly ordered world that there could be no room for the disorder that could arise from free will or indeed for anything not in harmony with this order. However, against this argument it should be pointed out that the order in the universe is not geometrical. The universe is very far from symmetrical. Besides the order in the universe, there is also a great deal of disorder in the universe. In the absence of a rigidly regulated geometrical order, there is room for human creativity and initiative and therefore for free actions.<sup>22</sup>

From a metaphysical point of view it is also important to point out that the future is not determined and therefore that there is room for

<sup>20</sup> L. J. Elders: *De Natuurfilosofie van Sint-Thomas van Aquino*, Bruges: Tabor, 1989: 34–35, has examined this problem with great perspicacity.

<sup>21</sup> Take the example of the cat killed by a car. Since the form or essence (cat) is of human origin, the cat was not killed by any natural cause (cause given in nature). If one attempts to give an objective cause (cause given in nature), one could only say that the cat was killed by matter (the material cause of the car).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. my article 'Is it a Perfect World? Spinoza and the Principle of Perfection', in: A. Tourneux (ed.): *Liber Amicorum Raphaël de Smedt*, Vol. IV, Leuven: Peeters, 2001: 161–178.

human free will. In *Metaphysics* E(VI), iii Aristotle examines the case of a man who happens to eat spicy food. Because he ate spicy food he got thirsty. Because he got thirsty, he went out to a well to drink. But at the well there were robbers who murdered the man. Aristotle is interested in asking the question whether it was predetermined (as the logical or psychological determinist would hold) that the man must die and, if so, as from what point.

His reply is that the man had to die as from the moment that he ate the spicy food. If you eat spicy food, you will inevitably become thirsty. If you become thirsty, it is logical for you to go out to the well to get water, and if there are murderers at the well, it is logical that they will murder you.

But if we trace back the series of apparently necessary causes from the man's death, we come to the point at which the man was hungry and decided to eat. By chance the first kind of food he found in his store cupboard was spicy. Or by chance he happened to feel like eating spicy food that day. It is this chance or accidental event which led to the further chain of necessary causes and to his death. According to Aristotle every chain of necessary causes, if one traces it back, is interrupted at some point by an accidental cause. An accidental cause is by definition uncaused, because it has no existence of its own, and for this reason determinism is incorrect.<sup>23</sup> St. Thomas agrees with Aristotle on this point in his Commentary on *Metaphysics* Book VI, although his primary concern is to defend freedom against theological determinism (the claim that freedom is rendered impossible by Divine Providence).<sup>24</sup>

It may be recalled that for Aristotle all causes relate to the past (one can only explain the man's death after it has taken place), and the past is unchangeable (i.e., necessary).<sup>25</sup> It is not causes that render the past unchangeable, but rather the unchangeability of the past which means that causes (rational explanations) are necessary.<sup>26</sup> Thus the thesis that

<sup>23</sup> For a full interpretation of *Metaphysics* E(VI), iii, cf. my article 'Aristotle's Refutation of Determinism (*Met.* E<sub>3</sub>)', in: J. Vijgen (ed.): *Indubitanter ad Veritatem. Studies offered to Leo J. Elders SVD*, Budel: Damon, 2003: 133–150.

<sup>24</sup> St. Thomas also agrees with Aristotle in *De Malo* VI ad 21; *In Peri Herm.* I, 14, 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Rhet.* III, xvii, 1418 a 5; *EE* V(=NE VI), ii, 1139 b 7–11; *De Cael.* I, xii, 283 b 13.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. J. Hintikka, U. Remes & S. Knuuttila: 'Aristotle on Modality and Determinism', *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 29, 1977: 102–103: "When a house is being built, say by capable builders who actively desire to build it, a potentiality of a house is present. But it does not predetermine the outcome [sc. in the future], for surely the process of building can be stopped, for instance by violence or by an earthquake. The same easily seems to us to be true of Aristotle's own chain of causes. He traces it down backwards [sc. in the

causes necessitate their effects in the past means no more than that, given the unchangeability of the past, rational explanations of the past must also be necessary. It does not mean that the future can be predicted even in principle, as accidental causes may intervene at any time. That the future is determined could only ever be a hypothesis even for the determinist, since the determinist is obliged to admit that he cannot predict the future with certainty, i.e., cannot show that the future is determined. Hence scientific or physical determinism is deficient and cannot constitute an objection to human freedom.

Again, it may be noted that in the ethical works Aristotle writes that the starting-point (*ἀρχή*) of free choice is internal, i.e., in the soul.<sup>27</sup> The possibility of free, i.e., uncaused, choice appears to be related, firstly, to the fact that the soul is a self-mover.<sup>28</sup> Its specific aim of happiness is not caused by any efficient cause<sup>29</sup> (as for Plato). Living beings are not merely passive receivers of determining influences, like a stone. Clearly human beings are not free if the body dominates the soul, but only, on the contrary, if the soul dominates the body. Secondly, in the case of human beings, the self-moving soul has an inbuilt faculty of intellect (*νοῦς*), which enables it to deliberate, that is to say, to propose a choice of ends to the will. The choice which takes place is free because the soul is not determined (forced) and could not be determined by anything material because it is immaterial.<sup>30</sup> The various possible options are proposed to the soul, but do not determine the soul, which is, therefore, free. Animals and plants are not free. But this is not because they do

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past]: a man is murdered if he goes out, he goes out if he is thirsty, he is thirsty if he has eaten pungent food [...] Such a chain is surely easy to break [sc. if one tries to trace it into the future]. It does not take a Hume not to find any impression of necessity connecting the different links of such a chain.”

<sup>27</sup> Cf. n. 6 *supra*.

<sup>28</sup> *De An.* II, i, 412 b 15–17. St. Thomas writes in *De Malo* 6, *ad* 10: “[...] voluntas autem [movetur] non ab alia potentia, sed a seipsa.” Again *ibid.*: 6 *corp.*: “[...] manifestum est quod voluntas movetur a seipsa; sicut enim movet alias potentias, ita et se ipsam movet.” Cf. *SCG* II, 48, 1243: “Sola ergo moventia se ipsa libertatem in agendo habent. Et haec sola iudicio agunt.”

<sup>29</sup> Cf. D. J. Furley: ‘Self Movers’, in: G. E. R. Lloyd & G. E. L. Owen (eds.): *Aristotle on Mind and the Senses. Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium Aristotelicum*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978: 169: “Aristotle does not *reject* the concept of self movers in *Ph.* VIII [...] It is evidently quite legitimate, in Aristotle’s view in these chapters [sc. 4 and 5], to call the whole a self mover provided that the moving part is itself unmoved except accidentally.”

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *In Peri Herm.* I, 14, 14: “[...] nulla enim vis corporalis potest agere per se, nisi in rem corpoream.”



not possess soul, but rather because they lack intellect, which is required in order to deliberate, that is to say, to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of different actions. Without deliberation, there is no freedom, since there is no choice.<sup>31</sup> Thanks to intellect human beings can engage the will to adopt a painful course of action—contrary to the desires of the body—because it is understood as the only path to a higher good. Thus freedom presupposes not just the possession of soul, but also of intellect.<sup>32</sup> Of fundamental importance in this context is the fact that freedom is entirely inexplicable without the existence of soul. It would appear that soul, as the immaterial and therefore uncaused cause of the choice of human (intellectual) beings is the only possible explanation of freedom, and that the failure to recognize this point or to see its implications led some of the greatest thinkers to reduce human freedom to a mysterious postulate or a truth knowable only *a priori*.

In this paper I have attempted to show that the conviction that human beings are free, which is held *a priori* in the field of ethics by some of the greatest thinkers, including St. Thomas, can be explained only by a metaphysical approach. It is not the case, as Voltaire held, that the world is made up of causes—one causing the other—and that human beings are the great exception. Rather, causes are explanations of the past, are largely the product of the free use of the human intellect, and are used by human beings to attempt to predict a future, which does not appear to be determined. Hence human free choice is not the great exception in a determined world, but rather is in harmony with a world, the future of which is undetermined. Divine Providence is not an objection, as shown by St. Thomas, nor is the order in the universe, nor are many of the things in the universe—namely artefacts and interpretations of nature—rather these are the result of human

<sup>31</sup> *STh* I<sup>a</sup>, 83, 3: “Dicendum quod proprium liberi arbitrii est electio.”

<sup>32</sup> St. Thomas strongly emphasizes intellect as being the source of man’s freedom—cf. *STh* Ia, 83, 1: “Sed homo agit iudicio; quia per vim cognoscitivam iudicat aliquid esse fugiendum vel persequendum. Sed quia iudicium istud non est ex naturali instinctu in particulari operabili, sed ex collatione quadam rationis, ideo agit libero iudicio, potens in diversa ferri. Ratio enim circa contingentia habet viam ad opposita [...] Particularia autem operabilia sunt quaedam contingentia. Et ideo circa ea iudicium rationis ad diversa se habet, et non est determinatum ad unum. Et pro tanto necesse est quod homo sit liberi arbitrii, ex hoc ipso quod rationalis est.” Cf. *SCG* II, 48, 1245. On the relationship of intellect to will in choosing, cf. *De Verit.* q. 22 a 15 *corp.*; q. 25 a 5 *corp.*; *STh* I–II, q. 13, a 1 *corp.* Cf. also e.g., K. Park: *Das Schlechte und das Böse. Studien zum Problem des Übels in der Philosophie des Thomas von Aquino*, Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2002, 35–36.

intellectual activity. The freedom of human beings, that is to say, the fact that they are not determined, unlike stones, by the influences that surround them, is due to the fact that they are animated, that is, they possess soul. Soul, being immaterial, cannot be determined by anything material, and if human beings did not possess soul, they could not be free. However, soul alone is not enough to make human beings, and only human beings, free. Of all living beings, only human beings are free, because they alone possess intellect, which is required to deliberate and to evaluate various possible choices. There are, therefore, very good reasons why human beings alone in the universe are free, since they alone possess soul and intellect.