

THE PLIGHT OF FREEDOM

I was speaking to a crowd on Parliament Hill Fields. In answer to a persistent questioner whom I admired for his youth I said somewhat testily: 'Freewill is not omnipotent; it is not the power of doing what we like, but of willing what we like.' He replied at once, and as I thought, not without a certain nimbleness of wit 'In other words, free-will is only the power of willing what we will.' He laughed and I think the crowd laughed as if I had happened upon an absurdity.

For a moment I was numbed by the nimbleness of the reply and the spontaneity of the laughter. Then suddenly I saw how the youth's paradoxical form of words had thrown light, where I had long wished light to be thrown, upon the essential action of freedom. I therefore looked my questioner in the face as I said: 'Yes, free-will is essentially the power to will what we will. Other animals can will this or that, can will to run or to lie down—can will to chase their quarry or to flee danger. But no animal wills to will. You can control a man's body, and sometimes by controlling his body you can control his intelligence, but you cannot control his will. You may throw him to death over a cliff; but you cannot control him to will or not to will to be thrown.'

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My youthful questioner's seeming paradox had opened my eyes more clearly than they had yet been opened to an intelligent being's essential and unique power of reflexion. The tri-dimensional can have three local movements, (1) rectilinear; (2) circular; (3) rotatory. Of these the most perfect is rotatory. Now in this perfect movement of the tri-dimensional round its centre there is some kind of 'reflexion' or turning round upon itself.

Yet this local reflexion of the tri-dimension is only a dim shadow of the perfect reflexion of a being endowed, as man is endowed, with intelligence and will.

Thus the acts of intelligence can reflect upon themselves 'ad infinitum.' Thus we have such intellectual acts as:

I know. § I know that I know. I do not know. I know that I do not know.

I doubt. § I know that I doubt. I do not doubt that I doubt.

I am certain. § I know that I am certain. I am certain that I am certain.

These reflexive acts of the intelligence are paralleled by acts of the will; though here, as St. Thomas says, the acts of the will being more essentially hidden, are less mapped out and named. But we may set down some of the reflexive activities in will: desire: love.

I will. I will to will. I will not will. I desire. I do not desire. I desire to desire. I love. I hate. I love to love. I love to hate. I hate to love.

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Just as infallibility is not omniscience, so likewise freedom is not omnipotence. Even the freedom of God is not omnipotence in the sense that God's free-will could not produce an infinite result. Only God's *necessary* acts are essentially infinite.

Free-will is thus a finite power; given to us not that we may be free, but that we may will.

Man's free-will is perfected not by the mere quality of freedom, but by the act of willing, *i.e.*, of loving. Admitting as St. Thomas admits, that no free-act is perfect unless it is perfectly free, we must also admit that, as behind all doubt and probability lies certainty, so too, behind as the contingency of freedom lies necessity. An act that is essentially free is necessarily free. To some stripling thinkers this is a dark saying that bewilders the mind. But it should surely be obvious that a human act is not necessary because it is necessarily free. Not to see this obviousness is to confuse the mode of a being or of an act with its sub-

§ It was in this stage of his reflexion that Descartes made his first false move. He said: 'I think therefore I am.' But not even Descartes can merely think, doubt, be certain. He must think, doubt, be certain of *something*. What that something is Descartes has never told his readers.

stance. But what the weaker thinkers cannot see is that an act may be free in its substance and necessary only in its mode of freedom.

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Another youthful questioner in Hyde Park stimulated my mind to a still further, and satisfactory development of the will's freedom. In an exhilarating joust of ideas he fell upon the phrase 'If I want to exercise my freedom.' What came after these words I cannot recall. Short as the phrase was, it opened up an old avenue of thought in the vast forest of the *Summa*. There I had learned that human acts, being in space, time and causality have circumstances that are (1) antecedent; (2) concomitant; (3) consequent. But the object of the will is not what is antecedent to—or concomitant with—or consequent upon—the object. With fine accuracy St. Thomas says that a man must delight in God for his own sake, as being his last end; and in virtuous deeds, not as being his last end, but for the sake of their inherent goodness, which is delightful to the virtuous (*Summa Theol. Pars I-II, Qu 70; Art 1 ad 2*).

Again we must not practise the contemplation of God because we love contemplation but because we love God. Or again we must not do any act *for* the (consequent) joy of the act; *e.g.* we must not believe *for* 'joy in believing'—we must not eat *for* the (consequent) pleasure of eating.

So, too, we must not act *for* the (consequent) pleasure of acting, neither must we act *for* the (concomitant) freedom of acting. Our free-will must have an object which it freely wills. But freedom which is a quality of the free act should not be the object of the free act.

We have already noted Descartes' fundamental ambiguity in the phrase 'Je pense donc je suis.' To *think* is one of the few intellectual words that do not seem to demand an object, though no intellectual act is possible without an object. What is true of intellectual acts is almost truer of volitional acts. As we cannot merely *think*, but must think A— or B—, so too we cannot merely will (or as my youthful questioner said, 'exercise our will'), but we

must will this or that—will to eat or drink, will to walk or halt, will to hoard or give, will to cheat or sacrifice, will not to be an adulterer, etc.

Yet so subtle are the workings of the free-will that when its object is a matter of shame to itself, it says and even says to itself 'I am exercising my freedom.'

All this serves to throw light upon the present plight of freedom, with its denial not only of psychological but of political and economic freedom.

The present writer's three score years and five take his memory back to the days when everything that considered itself intellectual, modern and progressive called itself 'Liberal.' Liberty as an idea has too much truth in it, and Liberals in these islands have been of too great service to oppressed Catholics that we should condemn it branch and root. But for the moment in these islands and elsewhere it seems dead. Its death in so short a time and in such vigour of youth presents a problem which we think can be solved only by the ethical (and therefore political and economic) principle that to make the concomitant of a free-will act the end of the free-will is finally to maim or kill freedom. Liberals of the last century may well have acted against their principle when they least thought in danger the thing they loved—or thought they loved. But ultimates whether of economics or politics or especially of ethics, demand such austerity of love that men, like unthinking mothers, can overlay what is most cherished. Perhaps there may be some truth—and therefore some lesson, in the opinion of some philosophers of history who detect in the once dominant Liberalism the error of self-expression or the crime of avarice. Of such inward motives the only judge is 'He Who searcheth the hearts.' But we whose own hearts are almost beyond our search, leaving final judgment to the Judge, have the humbler task of seeing that Freedom, now almost exiled from earth, may be brought back by our free-will seeking by all means and in all things to be a good-will.

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