

The Freedom of the Will

DOES man enjoy liberty of choice or does he not? This is a question which has occupied the minds of the world's greatest philosophers, and while it is generally admitted that man has free will, yet the difficulty of reconciling this doctrine with the foreknowledge of God, has led to many controversies. We do not presume to offer anything new on either side, but shall content ourselves with stating, as clearly as possible, the arguments generally adduced in support of the doctrine of free will, and this done, we shall endeavor to refute the chief objections put forth by those who oppose it.

But, before entering upon the proof of our thesis, we must first define our terms. We must state exactly what we mean by Will, and what by Liberty. The will is an inorganic faculty which tends towards or strives after some object apprehended as good, by the intellect. A good is anything that is desirable. Hence the object of the will is anything that is apprehended as desirable. Liberty, as applied to the will, signifies immunity from necessity; thus the will is said to be free in as much as it is not determined to any one particular good.

We have said that the object of the will is that which is apprehended as good. This may be apprehended as infinitely good—desirable in every respect, or as a finite good—desirable in some respects, undesirable in others. As regards the first, philosophers agree that the will is not free, that it wills the infinite good of necessity. For, since the will is ever striving after good, when there is presented to it an object which is good in every respect, and than which no greater good can be conceived, it must be drawn to that object necessarily. And again it is easy to see that the will must will something of necessity. For whatever is willed is willed, either of necessity or freely. Now if man chooses one particular good rather than another, since he is a rational being he must have a reason for so doing. He must choose that good for some purpose. He must

have an end in view. In a word he chooses that good because it is a means to the attainment of another good which he has previously willed. And this other good he has willed either of necessity or freely, and if freely, on account of some other good. But we cannot go on thus ad infinitum. Therefore we must come to some ultimate good that is willed necessarily, and this good philosophers tell us, is happiness.

But in the willing of particular, finite goods, is the will free or determined? Is man free to choose this or that particular good or is he inexorably predetermined by natural disposition, acquired habits or motives to one particular good, so that it is absolutely impossible for him to choose another? This is the question at issue and, as we have already stated, we shall endeavour to support the doctrine of free will.

We must, however, admit that a very great proportion of man's daily action is indeliberate, simply the result of the forces acting upon him, and that, even in those acts in which he exercises his power of choice, he is influenced by the strength of the motives attracting him to either side. But, on the other hand, we declare most emphatically that he can, and frequently does, set his will in opposition to all the forces acting upon him and make a free choice of this or that particular good.

Having thus stated our thesis, we now proceed to demonstrate it.

First. From the testimony of conscience. Conscience affirms that we have control over our acts; that with respect to a particular act we are free to do or to omit it. And the testimony of conscience is true. Therefore we have liberty of choice or free will.

The major proposition of this syllogism states that our conscience affirms that we have control over our acts. The truth of this statement may be demonstrated in many ways.

(a) Let us suppose that two alternative courses are open to me with respect to some act. Say, for example, an officer of some kind is to be elected. There are two candidates for election and I am going to vote for one or other of them. Before the time for casting my vote arrives I deliberate on the matter. I consider the

merits of each candidate, and finally decide which I shall vote for. Now, during the course of this deliberation, my conscience tells me that I am free to choose one or other of the candidates. Indeed if it were not so deliberation would be an utterly irrational act. For why should I deliberate as to which course I shall choose if I am not free to make a choice?

(b) Again, suppose I am beset by some temptation, some evil thought enters my mind. I endeavour to drive it out by directing my attention to something else, but the evil thought recurs again and again and it is only after a severe struggle that I succeed in expelling it. Now, taking an introspective view of what has been going on in my soul during this struggle, I am conscious that I was making a voluntary effort, that I was deliberately keeping before my mind thoughts other than that to which I was tempted, and that while I succeeded in overcoming the temptation, it was within my power, and alas, would have been only too easy for me to have given up the struggle and allowed the evil thought to take possession of my mind.

(c) Again, if I have deliberately done some evil act,—some act that has resulted in serious injury to myself or others—when I reflect upon my conduct I have remorse of conscience. I reproach myself for having done the act and I judge that I am worthy of blame. And why? Because I feel that while I did the act it was in my power to omit it. If I had not been free, but determined by circumstances, natural disposition or any other cause, to the commission of that act, then it would be folly to condemn myself for it and I might just as logically blame myself for the color of my eyes or the shape of my nose.

(d) On the other hand if I have deliberately done some good act or voluntarily made some sacrifice in the cause of virtue, I judge that my act has been meritorious, that I am deserving of a reward. True, I may not see any prospect of receiving such reward in this world, but nevertheless, I feel that I have established a just claim to it. And why? Again the same answer—because I feel that I was free to do the act or to omit it.

In the minor we have said that the testimony of conscience is true. This we demonstrate as follows.

That testimony is true which cannot be doubted without, *de facto*, being affirmed. And such is the testimony of conscience. Therefore the testimony of conscience is true.

The truth of the major of this argument is evident. The minor we shall prove. The testimony of conscience cannot be doubted without, *de facto*, being affirmed as true. For he who doubts the testimony of conscience necessarily affirms that he exists and that he doubts. But how does he know that he exists and that he doubts? Precisely from the testimony of his own conscience. He is conscious of these facts. Therefore he accepts as true that very *testimony which he attempts to doubt*.

Secondly. From the general consensus of mankind. Mankind in general affirms, and always has affirmed, the freedom of the will. And this general affirmation must be accepted as an expression of truth, Therefore man has free will.

The major is evident not only from the words but also, and more especially, from the actions of men. For men make laws commanding or forbidding certain actions; they bestow praise and honors on the doer of noble deeds and mete out punishment to the criminal; they make resolutions and give and receive promises; all of which show plainly their belief in the freedom of the will.

The minor states that this general affirmation must be accepted as an expression of truth. For it is impossible that almost all men, (since they are so different in their customs, education and religion, and since they live or have lived at different times, in different places and surrounded by different circumstances,) should agree in making a judgement about a truth, as intimately connected with the leading of a rational life as is the truth that man has free will, unless they were directed by something in their rational nature. And rational nature, ordained by God to truth, cannot deceive us. Therefore man enjoys free will.

Thirdly. From the nature of the will. The proper object of the will is that which is apprehended as good. Hence, as we have said above, an object that is apprehended as good in every respect draws the will to it of necessity. But, in this life, no object presents itself to the intellect as desirable in every respect. There is always some undesirable feature about it whether it be the difficulty of attaining it, the uncertainty of its possession, or its incompatibility with our highest good.

Now, since an object attracts the will only in so far as it is apprehended as good, if attention is directed to that feature of it which is undesirable and withdrawn from those which are desirable the object loses its force and the will can reject it. Therefore the will is not drawn necessarily by any finite good but is free to choose or reject it.

Fourthly. From the nature of the intellect. The intellect apprehends the universal. Thus if I have an idea of man, it is not an idea of some particular man, but of man in general. It is a universal idea of man. So too the intellect apprehends good in the universal. But under the universal idea of good are contained many different forms of good. Hence the intellect presents to the will not one particular good, but several. Now, everything we will is willed on account of something we have willed before and, in the last analysis, we find that all particular goods are chosen on account of the ultimate good. Thus then it appears that particular goods are means to the attainment of the ultimate good—happiness.

Suppose now I wish to go from Charlottetown to Montreal. There are several routes, any of which will take me there. Therefore no particular one of them is necessary to the attainment of my purpose, and consequently I am not compelled to select any particular route. In like manner, since particular goods are means to the attainment of the ultimate good, and since the intellect offers several particular goods to the will, the latter is not drawn of necessity to any one of them, but is free to choose from among them.

Having thus demonstrated our thesis, we turn now

to refute an objection that is frequently raised against free will. It may be stated thus :

God foresees, with absolute certainty, all my future acts. And an event which God foresees, will necessarily occur. Therefore I must necessarily perform those future acts which God foresees I shall perform.

That God foresees all my future acts I admit. That an event which God foresees will occur *infallibly* I also admit, that it will occur *necessarily*, if God foresees it as a necessary act, I admit, if He foresees it as a free act, I deny.

The knowledge of God extends not only to the occurrence of a future act but also to the manner of its occurrence. Hence He sees necessary acts as necessary and free acts as free. The knowledge possessed by any being, of the occurrence of an event is in no way the cause of its occurrence, but, on the contrary, the occurrence of an event is the cause of its being known. If I see a man coming down the street, while he is coming it cannot be true that he is not coming, yet he is free, so far as I am concerned, to come or not to come, and my seeing him is not by any means the cause of his coming. And if I could see future events as clearly as I see present events, I should see him coming before he was really on the way, yet my seeing him would not compel him to come, but he would still be free to come or not to come. And so it is with God. He, looking down from the height of eternity, sees spread out before Him the whole course of time and comprehends at one glance every event that occurs therein. He sees them not as future, but as present, events. With Him there is no future, no past—all is present. Therefore He sees my future acts as actually taking place, but the fact that He sees them cannot be said to be the cause of their occurrence any more than my seeing the man coming down the street is the cause of his coming.

“But,” says the opponent of free will, “an act, the omission of which is impossible, cannot be a free act. And the omission of an act which God foresees, is impossible. Therefore such acts cannot be free.”

Now, an act and its omission cannot both exist. One necessarily excludes the other. Hence if the act is really future its omission is impossible ; yet we cannot conclude from this that the act is not free. For, if at the present moment I am sitting, it is impossible for me to be standing, yet I cannot, on this account, be said to be sitting necessarily, for if I had willed otherwise I might have been standing. So also if my acts are future, they are future on account of my willing them, and if I should will to omit them, then they would not be really future, and God would see from all eternity the omission of the act instead of the act itself.

E. L. D. '16.



Happy he that can abandon everything by which his conscience is defiled or burdened.

He is a strong man who can hold down his opinion.

He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.

He is truly great who is great in charity.

He that ceases to be a friend never was a good one.

Words without thoughts never to Heaven go.

Necessity makes even cowards brave.