

Heaven as the Home of the Free: The Primacy of the Will In Duns Scotus

John C. Médaille

“I say, then, that as to the very essence of happiness, it is impossible for it to consist in an act of the will.”

St. Thomas Aquinas (ST I-II, q. 3, a.4)

“Scotus sees heaven as a vast kingdom of liberty in which man creates himself by freely loving God.”

Robert Prentice, OFM

Introduction

All Christians accept, to a greater or lesser degree, the notion of “free will.” Indeed, all concepts of reward and punishment become somewhat absurd if the will is not “free” in some measure or other. However, philosophers have often had a problem with the concept, insofar as they attempt to provide a “necessary” explanation of the world which the mind can grasp, free of the intellectual inconveniences of contingency.¹ Within the neat chain of casualties, potentialities reduced to act by strict rules, the idea of will, the very organ of contingency, provides a disturbing and discordant note, for the intellect cannot grasp by necessity that which is contingent. And if the intellect is primary, the will is paradoxical, at best. Theologies, even Christian theologies, to the extent that they are “philosophical,” have often exhibited this same problem with will. Yet if we do not conserve freedom, do we not lose all? It is only by situating the question within the larger theological issues of Man’s last end and the present means to that end can the question be

given its full import. For far from being a dry philosophical debate, the question of the primacy of the will or the intellect will lead to entirely different notions of spirituality in the present moment and happiness in the next world. This can be shown, I believe, by comparing the theology of an “intellectualist” (St. Thomas, in this essay) with that of John Duns Scotus, who advocates the primacy of the will.

Will and Intellect in St. Thomas

Thomas writes extensively of the will and the entire discussion is dominated by the categories of means and ends.² The order of action for the will is that first the intellect apprehends the ends, which are then desired by the will, then the intellect takes counsel as to the means, and finally the will desires the means (*ST I-II, q.15 a. 3*)³. As to the ends, insofar as the intellect apprehends them as good, the will *must* will them of necessity (*ST I, q. 82, a. 1*). “The will of

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, Volume Two: Willing*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) p. 15.

² Arendt, p. 117.

³ All quotations from the *Summa Theologica* are from Translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Allen, Texas; Christian Classics, 1981)

necessity must adhere to the last end, which is happiness... (ibid.)” At this point, the will is not a “rational” power, but an “intellectual” one (ibid.). Therefore, insofar as the ultimate ends are in view, the will is not free; rather it is free only in regards to means, that is, only in making choices concerning means to the ultimate end. Although “will” and “choice” are acts of the same power, only the later is “free” (*ST I*, q. 83, a. 3 & 4); the former cannot but will what the intellect proposes. The distinction between “will” and “choice” relates to the distinction between “intellect” and “reason.” The intellect, which deals with self-evident or mathematical truth, knows what it knows necessarily, while the reason works from things known by demonstration to things unknown.⁴ In like manner, the will wills necessarily, but chooses the means contingently (*ST I*, q. 82, a. 2). As such, the will *per se* is a passive power; as the intellect is reduced to act by the intelligible object (*ST I*, q. 79, a. 1) so the will is reduced to act by the appetible object.⁵ Either as will or as free-choice, the will is the appetitive power of the intellect (*ST I*, q. 83, a. 3); quoting The Philosopher, Thomas says that the “appetible object is a mover not moved, the will is a mover moved (*ST I-II*, q. 9, a. 1)”⁶ and the appetible object is

entirely within the domain of the intellect. The means to the end, however, are in the domain of the reason.

At this point it is appropriate to ask whether this ends/means distinction is sufficient to preserve freedom. Obviously Thomas does not believe that the will is free in regards to the ends, for “volition, properly speaking, is of the ends only (*ST I-II*, q. 8, a. 2),” and the volition is moved of necessity to its ends. But even the freedom in respect to means seems severely compromised, for this “freedom” emerges as a defect of reason, for he says:

Again, in all particular goods, the reason can consider an aspect of some good, and the lack of some good, which has the aspect of evil; and in this respect, it can apprehend any single one of such goods to be chosen or to be avoided. The perfect good alone, which is Happiness, cannot be apprehended by the reason as evil, or lacking in any way. Consequently, man wills Happiness of necessity, nor can he will not to be happy, or to be unhappy. Now since choice is not of the end, but of the means, as stated above (A. 3); it is not of the perfect good, which is Happiness, but of other particular goods. Therefore man chooses not of necessity, but freely (*ST I-II*, q. 13, a. 6).

This seems to say that “freedom” arises only from the inability to determine the good absolutely in any situation⁷, and that should this defect disappear, freedom must also disappear.

⁴ Arendt, p. 116.

⁵ Stephen D. Dumont, *Did Duns Scotus Change His Mind on the Will?, After the Condemnation of 1277. Philosophy and Theology at the University of Paris in the Last Quarter of the Thirteenth Century*, (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001) p. 725.

⁶ However, in article 3 he will say that “the will is mistress of her own acts,” but this applies only to the means, not the ends. Further, it is clear from q. 17 that the “mistress” is moved entirely by the reason.

⁷ Thomas Williams, “How Scotus Separates Morality From Happiness,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 1995, vol. LXIX, no. 3, p. 426.

Thus freedom, on its own terms, would be something to be avoided. Were man able to see the good in each situation, it is difficult to see how, under these assumptions, he could refuse it. Therefore, since reason directs the acts of the will, (*ST* I-II, q. 17, a. 5), it appears that man is free only in regard to the degree that the reason is imperfect. Freedom is therefore an imperfection, to be eliminated by perfect knowledge.

Sitting above all of these considerations is the “happiness imperative.” Man’s inability to refuse happiness, as the intellect presents it to the will, governs all other questions of freedom and morality. The will then is the intellectual appetite that moves the other powers in seeking this happiness, of necessity in regards to the end and “freely” in regards of the means.

Intellect and Will In Bl. Duns Scotus

As Thomas’s philosophy is driven by desire for happiness, Duns Scotus makes a radical break by separating morality and happiness. In doing so, he frees the will to be actually free: “it is clear that a free will is not bound to will happiness in every way in which the will would will it if it were an intellectual appetite without freedom (*Ordinatio* 2.6.2/9).” It is not that Scotus actually denies all of what is said about the necessity of willing happiness, it is just that he does not confine the whole of the will to this. Rather, Scotus follows St. Anselm in noting two inclinations of the will, one to “happiness” (the *affectio commodi*) and one to justice (the *affectio iustitiae*).⁸ But the will as applied to

⁸Alan B. Wolter, O.F.M., *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, William A. Frank, editor, (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of

“happiness” is not only not free, it is not even a will.⁹ Instead, it is a “nature,” impelled to action by its natural inclination. As nature, “I say that it is simply the inclination the will has towards its own perfection, just as in the case of other things that lack a free appetite.”¹⁰ This inclination is “no more an elicited act of the will than is the natural appetite of a stone.”¹¹

The whole of what St. Thomas says of the will can be subsumed, without too much violence, under the aspect of the *affectio commodi*, except that Scotus will give this inclination no part in freedom.¹² Freedom, rather, is located entirely within the *affectio iustitiae*.¹³ It is only in the will’s ability to act contrary to the natural inclinations that man achieves freedom.¹⁴ What is

America Press, 1997) p. 153. All quotations from Scotus, unless otherwise identified, will be from this text.

⁹ Wolter, p. 155. “I say then the same thing holds true for the will, because the natural will is really not will at all, nor is natural volition true volition, for the term ‘natural’ effectively cancels or negates the sense of both ‘will’ and ‘volition.’”

¹⁰ Wolter, p. 156.

¹¹ Wolter, p. 156.

¹² Wolter, p. 156, “If it is the natural rather than the free appetite that is referred to, then the reply to the question is clear, for the will necessarily or perpetually seeks happiness...”

¹³ Wolter, p. 298-9, “Therefore, this affection for justice, which is the first checkrein on the affection for the beneficial, inasmuch as we need not actually seek towards which the latter affection inclines us...this affection for what is just, I say, is the liberty innate to the will...”

¹⁴ Wolter, p. 153, “To love something in itself [or for its own sake] is more an act of giving or sharing and is a freer act than is desiring that object for oneself. As such it is an act more appropriate to the will, as the seat of this innate justice at least.”

clear is that the will achieves its liberty only in love; insofar as it is bound to its own advantage, it is not a will at all; but as it moves in behalf of another, even to the detriment of itself, it may be called “free.” Thus freedom becomes a moral enterprise¹⁵ located entirely within the inclination towards justice.

By breaking the connection between will and happiness, Scotus is able to allow a space for freedom that is not determined *a priori* to any particular or even final good. But this raises a problem, for if the will is not in some sense determined, how can it be reduced to some act, save in the most arbitrary way, which would not be freedom but chaos? The identification of will and happiness has at least the advantage of a convenient way to reduce the will to act, for the intellect provides “appetible objects” which *must* be chosen, while the reason provides options that *may* be chosen. In each case, the intellect and reason fulfill a desire, and desire indicates a lack of something. But if the will is not moved necessarily to fulfill these desires, that is, to fill its own lack, in what way does it move at all? Scotus replies that it is not any “lack” that determines the will, but a sufficiency, and a superabundant one at that. “There is another indeterminacy, however, that of a superabundant sufficiency, based on unlimited actuality...something indeterminate in [this] sense, however, can determine itself.”¹⁶ This in fact is an enormous shift. No longer is our will the effect of a defect, the partial filling of an absolute lack, but something capable of actualizing *itself* from its own super-

abundance.¹⁷ Scotus’ proof of this is tied directly to the proof of the same power in God, for if it were not so, then God, “who in virtue of his indeterminacy of unlimited actuality, is supremely undetermined in regard to any action whatsoever, would be unable to do anything of himself, which is false.”¹⁸ Man’s will, then, is directly an image of God’s will, and both are instances of abundance rather than insufficiency.

Now, if the will can determine itself, the intellect is no longer primary. Indeed, the intellect still proposes objects to the will, but now the will is free to accept or reject them. Now when the will wills happiness, it does so not necessarily, but freely, because it is always capable of refusing to will a particular happiness, or even happiness in general. To be sure, it is still not able to will misery or to nil happiness. Insofar as the will wills or nills, it must will happiness and nil misery. Yet the will can refuse either act; it may simply refuse to will happiness or nil misery.¹⁹ Thus the martyr in agony does not will his misery, but, for the sake of love, refuses to nil it and wills patience to endure it. In this way, the intellect’s hold over the will is broken. The will is no longer bound of necessity to objects

¹⁷ Wolter, p. 141, “But the indetermination ascribed to the will is not like that of matter, nor, insofar as it is active, is it the indeterminacy of imperfection, but rather it is the indeterminacy of surpassing perfection and power...”

¹⁸ Wolter, p. 141.

¹⁹ Wolter, p. 160, “I admit, then, that the will is determined to will happiness and to nil misery to this extent that if it should elicit some act with respect to these objects, it is limited and has to elicit an act of willing in regard to happiness and an acting of nilling as regards misery. Nevertheless, it is not absolutely determined to elicit either the one act or the other.”

¹⁵ Williams, p. 443.

¹⁶ Wolter, p. 140-41.

proposed by the intellect. Indeed, it is the will that controls the intellect, at least insofar as intellection is far from perfect. For with imperfect intellections, the will can either take “complacency” in any one of them, or it can confirm and intend the intellection.²⁰ Where before the intellect, on account of the insufficiency of the will, commanded the will, now the will, on account of the insufficiency of the intellect, commands the intellect.

But not only is the will self-determined and super-abundant, it is rational. In fact, rationality resides in the will, not the intellect. The intellect is a natural power; that is, in absence of any obstacle, it *must* grasp its object. But the will is a self-determining power for opposites, hence it is the will that is rational, and the intellect that is purely natural. As such, the intellect lacks within itself any power for transcendence; transcendence must remain in the domain of the will.

Heaven as the Home of the Free

At first glance, it is difficult to see, as Hannah Arendt points out, why Thomas insists on the primacy of the intellect, since this does not arise from his general philosophy of being; the objects of the will and the intellect are the same—Being—and different only as considered under the aspect of the good or of the true.²¹ Hence, there would

seem to be no priority either in knowing or willing, and Thomas himself says that “these powers include one another in their acts, because the intellect understands that the will wills, and the will wills the intellect to understand (*ST* I, q. 82, a.4).” Nevertheless, for Thomas the intellect is the “more noble” power “absolutely” because “the object of the intellect is more simple and more absolute than the object of the will (*ST* I, q. 82, a. 3).” But does it really make sense to apply “superiority” to the true rather than the good, seeing as they are one? Ultimately, the reason for this priority must be sought solely in man’s last end.²² Thomas is replying to Augustine, for whom the will was primary and the end of man was to be in loving union with God.²³ In reply, Thomas says that “some one may think that the last end and final felicity of man is not in knowing God, but rather in loving Him,” nevertheless, “The final happiness of man then substantially consists in knowing God by the understanding, and not in any act of the will (*SCG* III, 26).” The reason for this is that possession of the beatific vision leads to extinction of desire²⁴, and were there is no desire the will must be in a state of “complacency”.²⁵ Thus heaven is a place of rest and contemplation in which the will is complacent and its only function is “delight.” But can this view save human freedom?

²⁰ Wolter, p. 151, “Hence, by means of these confused and imperfect intellections present there, the will...can take complacency in any one of them...and... by taking pleasure in one, the will confirms and intends that intellection. Hence, that which was imperfect and disregarded becomes perfect and intense through this complacency, and thus the will can command thought and turn the intellect towards it.”

²¹ Arendt, p. 121.

²² Arendt, P. 122.

²³ Arendt, p.

²⁴ “Man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek.” (*ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8).

²⁵ Robert P. Prentice, “The Degree and Mode of Liberty in the Beatitude of the Blessed,” *Deus et Homo ad Mentum J. Duns Scoti*, Rome: Societas Internationalis Scotistie, 1972, p. 328.

Scotus would say no; he has a completely different vision of heaven, which is, as Robert Prentice tells us:

...a vast kingdom of liberty in which man *creates* himself by freely loving God, in which God freely conserves the ontological status of this free human *creation*, and in which God freely collaborates with man to make perpetually possible and actual the free psychological act of fruitional love which man directs to Himself.²⁶

The distinction then is between a heaven based on *visio* and one based on *fruitio*, the free adhesion of the will to the object for its own sake. Beatitude, for Scotus, cannot be attained without the free act of the will that elicits the act of adhesion to God for his own sake.²⁷ On earth, this fruitional love goes outside itself to transcend itself and therefore it must do so, ultimately, in heaven.²⁸ Hence, “the kingdom of the blessed is a kingdom which has divine liberty as its first ruling principle.”²⁹ However, does not this “liberty” contain a danger as great as heaven itself? For if man in beatitude is free, is he not as free to sin as he is here? In the face of freedom, can heaven be guaranteed in perpetuity?

The Problem of Perpetuity

For Thomas, perpetuity is obviously not much of a problem; liberty, so limited in life, is not present at all in heaven; sin is therefore excluded *a priori*; man knows God by an act of intellection, and the complacent will,

possessing happiness, lacks any further desire by virtue of our perfected habits. Beatitude is therefore possessed in perpetuity by its very form. But Scotus rejects this formal perpetuity in the name of divine and human liberty. For everything about beatitude is dependent on the divine will and hence beatitude can have no “necessity” about it.³⁰ Further, even from man’s point of view, man’s act of loving God cannot be necessitated, but always remains a free act.³¹ Finally, if the position of Thomas is correct, then the intellect could no longer be commanded by the will. Even the perfection of the habits would be insufficient, since habits are secondary causes, and cannot render the primary causes (the faculties) necessary.³²

Since Scotus can find nothing in the will which renders it impeccable, he seeks the cause outside the will, namely in the free action of God, “which restricts the zone of the [will’s] activity: the will retains the potency to sin, but God prevents the realization of that potency.”³³ Of course, this immediately raises the question as to whether the will, cut off from one of its potencies, can still be called “free” or even a “will” at all. Scotus answers this objection by pointing out that cooperation with a superior cause does not compromise the will, and specifically does not compromise its act of free adhesion to God. For Scotus, the fact that God moves the will is not against the nature of the will; it is only a necessity imposed by an inferior cause that is repugnant to the will. Nor does God’s preventative

²⁶ Prentice, p. 328

²⁷ Prentice, p. 330.

²⁸ Prentice, p. 331.

²⁹ Prentice, p. 332.

³⁰ Prentice, p. 333.

³¹ Prentice, p. 334.

³² Prentice, p. 336.

³³ Prentice, p. 338.

action change the nature of the act which the will does place; it still remains a free act.

One wonders at this point if Scotus has really preserved liberty. For it would seem rather odd that after all the struggle with sin in this world, the whole problem is resolved by a kind of *deus ex machina* in heaven. For if God can preserve our wills from sin and still maintain our liberty intact, why does he not just do that in the here and now as well as in the hereafter? It would certainly seem a better method than sending his Son to take the form of a slave, to have him wander the earth in the company of Palestinian peasants, and die a horrible death. What Scotus seems to have done is to produce a celestial version of “once saved—always saved.” As long as one insists on liberty, as Scotus seems to agree, one must exclude a formal impeccability.

But if formal perpetuity cannot be cannot be allowed on account of liberty, is there any way we allow a *practical* impeccability, without relying on a purely miraculous solution? It seems to me that impeccability in practice can be guaranteed in three ways. In the first place, it is not the “complacency” of the will that works for its sinlessness, but its perfection in active adhesion to the beloved. Precisely because it is both active and perfected, lover and beloved so interpenetrate each other that there is simply no space for sin to enter in. The will is both perfectly fulfilled and perfectly active in that fulfillment. There is a weak analogy to earthly marriage, in which the faithfulness of the lovers excludes the possibility of sin. But of course human love is in time and subject to the vicissitudes of change and fortune; love in beatitude is eternal. But this eternity

must not be imagined as a stasis, as it would be in complacency, but as an exstasis, an *ecstasy*, an interpenetration of lover and beloved, precisely because the will is active.

Secondly, even if temptation where to operate in heaven, it will have to work on an object who has “knowledge of good and evil.” The blessed, as members of the Body of Christ, have immediate access to the full experience of the race. Presumably, we will have survived every temptation imaginable; there will simply be nothing with which to tempt us that we have not already endured, experienced, and overcome, in at least one of our members. This in itself could be a sufficient prophylactic against sin, as well as fulfilling the history of man, beginning with the first day in the Garden; indeed, this would seem to grant a meaning and dignity to human history and struggle.

Finally, the fact of eternity makes a difference. Because of our current limitation in time and space, much sin, if not most or even all, is performed in ignorance of the consequences. We may rationalize the act in ignorance of its consequences. But in an eternal state, are not the act and the consequences equally present to us? And if we understood the consequences, would we have performed the act? None of these methods removes the potency to sin, but make the exercise of that potency impossible in practice.³⁴

³⁴ [Note to Dr. Frank] I think that there is even a better way of dealing with this, but it involves a slightly different anthropology from either Thomas or Scotus and I have not the time or scope to develop it here. Briefly, for both of these men, habits are secondary causes formed by the acts of the will and the intellect. This is true, up to a point. But in the end, the habits *are*

The Means to the End

The philosophers are united in declaring that the ends dictate the means. The philosopher who locates man's end in intellection will have man living a life in which "knowing" is the highest value and charity of somewhat less worth. Therefore we are not surprised to read in Aquinas the following hierarchy of the acts of worship:

Nevertheless, there is a certain order here. *First and foremost the acts of the mind* directed to God belong to the worship we are talking about. Second, there are the acts of the body performed to stir up and express them, for instance, prostrations, sacrifices and the like.

the man, at least the man we are *becoming*. Habits are the seat of character and personality; the will, intellect and affections are the tools by which we create the habits, which in turn direct the will, intellect, and affections. The habits then, are the man we create. In this way, we image in the realm of becoming the God who creates himself in the realm of being. We are all, to that extent, "self-made men," or we will be when the job is finished. Human liberty is always limited by the fact that we cannot take control of our origins and be fully responsible for ourselves; but in our habits, we do create ourselves, we are our own origins. The habits therefore (and to steal a phrase from Fritz) are the "metaphysics of the future."

C. S. Lewis put the problem this way: with whom would you rather play poker, a man who is earnest about not cheating, or the man who simply doesn't cheat? The earnest man certainly performs a meritorious act of the will, yet the man who simply doesn't cheat, though he performs no act of the will, is still the better man. He is certainly the better card partner. This habit in him is perfected, yet we would hardly say that he has lost any of his liberty. Thus, when our habits are perfected in beatitude, there will be no card sharks, but neither will there be a loss of liberty. Rather it will be the perfection of liberty. This, I think, is a more Thomistic view, but it preserves the Scotist requirement for liberty.

Third, connected with the same worship are all the other acts directed towards our neighbor for the sake of God (*Italics added*).³⁵

Intellection here seems to take a clear priority over charity, and this makes sense in light of an end that is intellectual. Faith, then, becomes a matter of propositions (*ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 2) and salvation a matter of perfecting the intellect. Indeed, faith itself is but a temporary expedient, which will whither in the light of true beatific knowledge.³⁶

But for Scotus, "the perfection of rational creatures is the perfection of loving. On this point, the philosophers are mistaken. In their analysis of human nature, they over-identify rationality with knowing rather than loving."³⁷ Thus in this life, we achieve transcendence through love (will) rather than by knowledge. This brings us back to the problem posed to us in the Garden: Obedience vs. knowledge. God demands of our parents absolute obedience and leaves debate to the devil. He absents himself from the scene and refuses to give reasons for obedience; indeed, a demonstration would bring obedience into the realm of reason, which would be paradoxical. He leaves it for man to figure it out, and since then there has

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Faith, Reason and Theology; Questions I-IV of His Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, Armand Maurer, translator, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1987), p. 73.

³⁶ "It is impossible for the that one and the same thing should be believed and seen by the same person. Hence it is equally impossible for one and the same thing to be an object of science and of belief... (*ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 5)."

³⁷ Mary Beth Ingham, "Duns Scotus, Morality and Happiness: A Reply to Thomas Williams," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol LXXIV, no. 2, p. 189.

been a war between faith and reason, with each man emphasizing one or the other.

But Scotus, as we have seen, identifies the *will* as the rational faculty, and the intellect as a merely natural one. In identifying the will and rationality has he not provided the means for ending the war between the two? For if will (and with it, obedience and love) are now identified as “rational,” the problem posed by the serpent turns out to be a false dilemma. We can love without violating reason, at least ultimately; whatever disputes there are in the here and now must turn out to be a trick of our temporal perspective. I leave the last word on this to Hannah Arendt, who has captured the Scotist notion of the purpose of man in this life better than most:

Man, in contradistinction to all other parts of Creation, was not freely designed; he was created in God’s own image...God’s creature is distinguished by the mental capacity to affirm or negate freely, uncoerced by either desire or reasoning.

The miracle of the human mind is that by virtue of the will it can transcend everything...and this is the sign of man’s being created in God’s image...The willing ego, when it says in its highest manifestation, “*Amo: Volo ut sis,*” “I love you; I want you to be”—and not “I want to have you” or “I want to rule you”—shows itself capable of the same love with which supposedly God loves men, whom he created only because he willed them to exist and whom he *loves*

*without desiring them*³⁸ (Italics in original).

³⁸ Arendt, pp. 135-136.

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