

HUMAN FREEDOM: ITS ONTOLOGICAL BASIS

N. Ezeanyino

Man as we know is often referred to as the microcosmos because of his being the embodiment of both clarity and confusion. He is a mystery both to himself and to others, and that is why existentialists tell us that he is not just an object of empirical observation but also a transcendental subject that defies all logical reasoning. Prof. Battista Mondin describes him as an "impossible possibility." And Jaspers says that he is a "potentiality incarnate". How is the actualization of these potentialities possible? How does man come to discover or unravel these impossibilities that ~~is~~ himself?

All these "Hows" are embedded in the fact that man is a free agent. As human beings, we are aware of our deliberate choices and actions; of our being ourselves whenever our self-determination is achieved. The evidence for this cannot be demonstrated or explained by any one other than the person himself. As Gabriel Marcel puts it:

*"... my freedom is not and cannot be something that I observed (constates) as I observed an outward fact. Rather it must be something that I decide and that I decide, moreover, without any appeal. It is beyond the power of anyone to reject the decision by which I assert my freedom, and this assertion is ultimately bound up with the consciousness that I have of myself."*¹

With this premise, it is apparent that I intend to deviate from the usual approach to the problem of freedom which has the tendency of thinking even instinctively of determinism. We often want to think of freedom just as a predicate belonging to the essence of man rather than as part of that essence. The problem that is uppermost in my mind, therefore, is to excavate into the fundamental or ontological basis of human freedom. There has been a lot of controversy down through the ages as to whether man is just one of those objects that are subject to the laws of nature-deterministic laws; or, whether he exercises a certain level of autonomy over nature. It is, therefore, the desire of this paper to demonstrate as far as possible that freedom is nothing extraneous to man but rather part of his essence as man. It does not pretend to offer the final solution to the controversy but it is meant to try and provoke thoughts for further reflections.

I have set out to approach the above problem from the scholastic metaphysical standpoint (without however jeopardising the moral angle). This is a theoretical approach to the problem of free will rather than a practical one. Hence, the task before me is to determine how far human freedom is in consonance with our experience, knowledge and understanding of human nature. But, before this is done, it is just natural that I first define the concept of freedom, since, according to Aristotle, definition is one of the

most important logical operations within science. Then, I shall make an analysis of the nature of man, and then, draw up some possible conclusions.

Definition of Term: The term "freedom" according to the *Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary* is "the state of not being under control and being able to do whatever one wishes".² Brugger and Baker, in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, tell us that "freedom in general is the state of not being forced or determined by something external, in-so-far as it is joined to a definite internal faculty of self-determination".³ In other words, freedom is seen as the absence of coercion in performing or not performing any actions that enhance man's self-determination.

Freedom seen in this sense implies free-will/free-choice-decision, which is a translation of its corresponding latin concept "liberum arbitrium". Free-will points to that "freedom possessed by human being who, encountering an object he evaluates as finite, may choose whether or not to yield to the attraction of that object".⁴ This freedom of the will is so only with regard to particular or partial and contingent goods. And each contingent good always has a double face, in the sense that it can be attractive or otherwise, that is, desirable or not.

Origen saw freewill as part of man's essence which is more manifest in the diversity of human behaviour. According to him, "none of these spirits or souls — or however these rational beings must be called — are constrained with force or against their freewill to act differently from their inclination, otherwise, they would be removed from their own nature"⁵. And from the citation from Gabriel Marcel above, freedom is that act by which I am myself, that I realize myself, since one of the characteristics of an authentic human person is the ability to be the master of one's acts. It is in freedom that man defines himself according to Jean Paul Sartre.

The above definitions and conceptions of freedom point to an ordinary language understanding of freedom as: freedom for something rather than freedom "from something". While the latter connotation implies liberation from bondage of whatever sort, the former points to the fact that man is free "to do something". This is the freedom of choice which is the object of our discussion, through which man realizes his full being as a person.

Kinds of Freedom: We have so far been discussing freedom as the absence of any restriction or pressure on the will to choose or not to choose between alternatives in his struggle for self-realization. The exclusion of certain factors which, in the practical sphere hinder this self-determination, gives rise to the different kinds of freedom such as:

- (a) *Physical Freedom:* where no external obstacle impedes man's will to act as desired.

form which actuates the human body. There is a real substantial union between the body and the soul, that when we talk of man as a species, we refer neither to his body nor to his soul alone, but to man as a composite of body and soul. This soul, being spiritual in nature, does not depend on the body for its existence as an exceptionally complete substance whereas the body does depend on the soul.

*"In fact, in our concept one does not attribute an act of being to the body and another act of being to the soul (exactly as Plato and his followers do.) The act of being is one alone, that of the soul, which from the first instant of its existence is also participated in by the body. From that moment one has that complete reality (both as a substance and as a species) called man."*¹⁰

Bernard J.F. Lonergan lends an insight to the above analysis of man and his being when he said that

*"man, the concrete being, is both material and spiritual; he is material by his physical, chemical, organic and sensitive conjugates; he is spiritual by his intellectual conjugates. Still, man is not just an assemblage of conjugates, he is intelligibly one, and that unity has its metaphysical ground in his central form."*¹¹

Now, what are these "intellectual conjugates" of man other than his intellect and will? And what is his "central form" which is the ground of the unity of his being but his soul — the form of the matter which is the body? Rationality, therefore, belongs to the powers of the soul, and such powers, as already noted are intellection and volition. It means then that these powers, being spiritual activities, with their base in nature, are man's distinguishing characteristics. As a spiritual substance, therefore, the soul is, in the order of being, superior to the body which is matter.

It is clear from the above that the ontological foundation of man's being is located in his spiritual nature, the soul. This soul is defined by William A. Wallace as "the primary principle whereby we live, sense, move and understand."¹² In other words, it is the principle of life and activity in man. These activities are possible due to the power parts of the soul. The soul is said to possess parts, not quantitatively but as potencies or powers for performing different types of life's activities. To these potencies belong the cognitive and volitional powers; besides the vegetative and sentient ones.

The Will and Its Object: Willing as a spiritual activity belongs to man as such. The will is that rational appetite in man which as a spiritual power, naturally tends toward the good, the 'perfect good', as its object. It is in its nature to desire the good, that is, being as appetitive and as a value. In the face of the "perfect good" which is Happiness, therefore, the talk on human freedom would be a futile endeavour since the will cannot but tend towards it. Hence man's freedom is in the terms of particular goods with which he is being

confronted every moment of his life. As E. Beyer puts it: "man is free in his choice of particular goods, because none of them completely saturates his natural inclination towards the fullness of good."¹³

If the will naturally seeks the perfect good, then we are faced with the problem of the reprobates. Shall we say that they choose damnation or is there any deficiency in the nature of their will? This is surely a moral problem which is not within the scope of this paper. But as we are talking of human will, the fact remains that what constantly confronts it is the contingent or partial good which seeks physical goods in so far as it finds them reasonable.

As a rational appetite, the will desires what is presented to it by the intellect as good. Knowing and willing always go together since nobody desires or can desire what he does not know, or what he has no idea whatsoever of. Summarizing the whole idea of the object of the will, Mary T. Clark has this to say:

*"... if any universally good object in every respect faces the will, it tends to this by necessity if it wills at all, since it cannot will the contrary. But whenever an object that is not good in every respect faces the will, it does not necessarily tend toward this. When something good lacks something, it has the character of 'not good', and so only the perfect good with nothing lacking to it is beyond rejection by the will. Happiness is such a thing. Every particular good as lacking some element of goodness can be considered as 'not good'. Therefore, a good like this can be either rejected or accepted by the will, since the will can tend toward an object in respect to its various aspects."*¹⁴

In the face of these goods, the will has to exercise its power of choice. This is because "... in reality, the intellect never proposes to the will a concrete good which has all the charisma of the absolute, universal good, but only particular, limited, defective goods, and, therefore, goods exposed to being rejected or repelled. Here resides the profound reason by which the human will is free in its potent tension towards the universal good and its permanent dissatisfaction with any concrete goods of this world."¹⁵

Precisely here lies that act through which man achieves his self-realization or self-determination. It is in the face of 'constant genuine choices' that man fully becomes himself and not just one of the machines or a robot, an invention of the modern technological age. For Karl Jaspers, man's experience of the inner reality of freedom is an awareness of the being which he is. Hence "conscious of his freedom, man desires to become what he can and should be."¹⁶ A human being, as a real existing person, a historically unique individual, is a person who, according to Ludwig B. Lefevbre, "... has the possibility to decide this or that way, to act in one way or another; he is free. This freedom is what Jaspers meant when he talks of man as being 'potentiality incarnate,'"¹⁷ Man's being comes to light, therefore, only in freedom.

Even the things we see as obstacles to freedom like the society, laws, and above all, man's materiality, are all possibilities for the realization of the man that he is, which is the essence of his being a free agent. The more man realizes that his freedom is to be exercised with the consciousness of other freedoms, the more his freedom grows; for human freedom does not grow in isolation.

Again, it is in the conditionality of man's materiality, the world and its physical laws that authentic human freedom thrives. Man naturally feels elated when, in his freedom, he transcends all these conditionalities. He really feels himself a man because he is the 'master of his acts'.

Whatever obstacles, therefore, there may be in the way of man's exercise of his freedom, are all challenges for him to achieve true self-hood. Man as an open and non-regimented being is made manifest in the exercise of his freedom. This openness is possible thanks to his spiritual faculties or capacities of intellect and will with which the act of choice is possible. The act of choice, we reiterate, manifests three principal moments of deliberation, judgment and decision. These moments of enquiry, evaluation and decision are all acts of a rational being, and so, cannot be attributed to an irrational or brute force.

Conclusion: From our exposition so far, we have tried to show that man possesses the act-of-existence, or rather that "he is" through his vital principle, the soul. To the degree that an existent possesses this act-of existence (the 'to be of an existent'), to that degree it is a subsistent being united in itself. The root of an existent's activity and spontaneity is that act by which it exists and subsists as an incommunicable individual and that is rooted in the life principle, the rational soul, in the case of man. The more an existent is itself and more unified in itself, the more its activity becomes its own.

If free act is the act of both the intellect and the will, and these are faculties of the soul, that metaphysical ground of the unity of the individual it follows that willing is an immanent activity: the activity that springs from the being of the agent. As an immanent as well as a spiritual activity it has its origin from that which is most intimate in man—his soul. Human freedom, therefore, is ontologically grounded in the spirit of man which transcends all temporality.

REFERENCES

1. Marcel, Gabriel. *The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality*. Vol. II South Bend, Indiana: Regenery/Gateway Inc., A Gateway Edition, 1979, p. 113.
2. *Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary*. 1985 S.V. "Freedom".
3. Brugger, Walter and Baker, Kenneth, Ed. *Philosophical Dictionary*. Spokane: Washington: Gonzaga University Press. 1974, p. 146.
4. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967, S.V. "Free Will" by P. Nolan.

5. Simonetti, M. in *Origene, I Principi*, Italian Translation, Torino: UTET. 1968, P. 164, note 1.
6. Stumpf, Samuel Enoch. *Philosophy: History and Problems*, Second Edition, Book 1. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company. 1977, p. 405.
7. Anderson, F. James. *Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Chicago: Henry Regenery Company, A Gateway Edition. 1969, p. 21.
8. Stumpf, Samuel Enoch. op. cit., p. 405.
9. Earle, William. "Jaspers' Philosophical Anthropology" in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, Augmented Edition, Edited by SCHILPP, Paul Arthur. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company. 1981, p. 523.
10. Mondin, Battista. *Philosophical Anthropology*. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India. 1985, p. 223.
11. Lonergan, Bernard J. F. *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. London: Darton Longman and Todd. 1958, p. 518.
12. Wallace, William A., O.P. *The Elements of Philosophy: A Compendium for Philosophers and Theologians*. New York, Alba House, 1977, p. 61.
13. Beyer, Engelbert. "Ethics: Supplement". Lecture Notes at SS. Peter & Paul Seminary, Ibadan, April, 1976, p. 3.
14. Clark, Mary T., Ed. *An Aquinas Reader*. Garden City, New York: Image Books. 1972, p. 293.
15. Mondin, Battista. op. cit., p. 114.
16. Jaspers, Karl. *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, translated by MANHEIM Ralph. Archeon Books. 1968, p. 67.
17. Lefebvre, Ludwig B. "The Psychology of Karl Jaspers" in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*. op. cit., p. 496.

Rev. Fr. Nkechi Ezeanyino D.D.L., Ph.D.(Cand.) is a lecturer in the Dept. of Philosophy, Seminary of SS. Peter & Paul, Ibadan, Nigeria.