Do human beings have a free will?

Some theological thoughts on a continuing debate

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The ascent of the neurosciences has propelled the old question of whether human beings have free will back into the centre of academic and public interest. From their groundbreaking research in the structure and the functioning of the human brain, some scientists have advanced claims of a much more far reaching nature. Those claims concern directly the possibility of human free will and thus indirectly all the anthropological and ethical notions based on that assumption. Most controversially perhaps, some have argued that, since the penal code is fundamentally based on the concept of guilt, it would need equally fundamental rewriting once we have to concede that without free will there is no such thing as guilt.

One of the most well-known pieces of evidence for the neuroscientists' rejection of free will is an experiment conducted by the American Benjamin Libet. In this experiment people were asked to perform a simple action, such as pushing a button. In front of them there would be a device on which a dot was performing a circular motion. They were to remember the precise position of the dot at the moment when they were 'first aware of the wish or urge to act' (i.e. the 'will'). The position of the dot at the time when they would actually perform this action was noted automatically and

was normally two hundred milliseconds after the respective person first noted the 'will'. At the same time, however, Libet had also connected their head to an EEG. It is accepted that the brain, before an action is carried out, builds up a so-called readiness potential which can be measured (and was measured in the experiment). The result—surprising to many—was that the readiness potential was there on average three hundred milliseconds before the 'will' to act was noted as being consciously there. From this, Libet and many others have concluded that free will, insofar as it is the conscious feeling that an act of volition precedes our actions really is an illusion. Rather, we persuade ourselves—or a 'something' within us persuades us (these people have at times an uncanny way of introducing biological entities as quasi subjects!)—that our action has been willed in advance.

It takes not much for anyone with some schooling in philosophical theories of human agency or in the philosophy of mind to detect a certain crudeness in some crucial assumptions underlying not necessarily the experiment as such (although something could be said about that), but the conclusions drawn from it. And if it is true, as some of Libet's friends relate, that he, being originally a dualist, initially intended the experiment to offer proof for the existence and relevance of free will, this would even more strongly underline the awkward fact that free will is seen here as potentially an empirical fact.

That its existence as such an empirical fact is dubious has, however, been seen long before the dawn of the neurosciences. Determinism could be, and was, argued for on the basis of Darwinism, mechanism, but also on merely philosophical or religious grounds. Its opponents have thus had ample time to develop a strong armour of arguments against it which they only had to bring into position against this new assault of an essentially naturalistic anthropology. Often philosophers would simply point out problems resulting from any such denial of free will on what one might call a transcendental level. The way we understand and express ourselves rests

firmly on the premise that human beings are, in principle, capable of voluntary action whatever external or internal force may influence them in any given case. The simple fact, pointed out already by Aristotle at the beginning of book iii of his *Nichomachean Ethics*, that we praise or blame human beings for certain actions necessarily implies the assumption that those same persons could have acted differently: a brave person could have been a coward, a traitor might have acted honourably, a liar might have spoken the truth, and a hero could simply have missed out on his heroic deed.

We could easily add to that. I have mentioned the demand by some that we should reform penal code since the defendant cannot, by definition, be guilty. But, we may ask, why only the defendant? What about the other people involved in the trial: the prosecutor, the judges, the witnesses, the police? They should, should they not, be granted the same privilege, if this is what it is, of being relieved of their responsibility. We could thus no longer speak sensibly of a fair trial, a faithful witness, a skilful or, indeed, a feeble advocate.

But this is not all. The scientist arguing that the penal code should be changed is apparently making an appeal to those people who would be in charge of changing the legislation: ministers, MPs, civil servants. His denial of free will, however, must apply to those as well as to anyone else. Why then appeal to them as they—much as the criminal—act on the basis of inscrutable brain activities; for their legislative activities they cannot, then, be held responsible any more than the former for his crimes.

To show some absurd consequences of the naturalist position is not, however, to prove the opposite thesis, the affirmation of human free will. On the contrary, a long history demonstrates the flaws and weaknesses on both sides of the divide. A recent monograph on the subject appropriately had mazes on its cover and actually started off by comparing the person trying to understand the issue of free will with one lost in a labyrinth. Most promising appears at the moment the attempt by compatibilists who try to

show that free will is not only possible in a world governed by causal laws, but that it can only be comprehended within such a world. According to the compatibilist theory the contradiction between determinism and free will rests on a misconception. They point out that we cannot even think of any action or any event without asking why this happened or was done. To be given an answer to this question does not at all preclude the attribution of free will. We do not find it objectionable to call an action voluntary if we are given a reason why it was done as long as this reason is not an external force imposing on a particular person an action this person would have sought to avoid.

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This has been no more than a rough sketch of the state of the present debate. Theology does not seem to figure prominently in this debate. This is surprising given that, historically, the rise of theories of a free will is closely related to the development of Christian theology. Is there anything theology might contribute? I think the answer is yes, and the main interest of this paper is to make some preliminary suggestions as to what a contribution this might be. I shall do this by reference to some early historical occurrences of theological elaboration on the issue of free will and by pointing out why the perspective which emerges from that kind of elaboration might be interesting and beneficial to contemporary debates. My argument shall essentially be hinged on the following observation. Both, opponents and defenders of free will in contemporary debate start from the assumption that the case for free will (or against it) must involve deliberation. The paradigm is always that of choosing between two or more options. We have lunch at a buffet and could either have roast beef or a vegetarian lasagne. Do we, then, decide freely or is the choice, in whatever way precisely, predetermined? It has been characteristic of the theological debate, however, that at some point it has raised the issue of God's will and of its freedom. Now God, surely, does not deliberate. What, then, constitutes his 'willing' and what constitutes his 'freedom'? It seems clear

that, whatever the answer is, this must in turn become relevant for the way we understand our own will and our own freedom. For while we are not God and, therefore, always in need to deliberate and choose, God's willing and his freedom will, in all probability, constitute an ideal and, as such, define what human willing and human freedom should at least seek to emulate.

2. If we look at the origin of theological interest in 'free will', we find this at first similar to those concerns that dominate contemporary debate. Early discussions, for example in Origen, are apparently driven by the interest to counter Gnostic determinism. Origen, in his *De principiis* III 1, argues very much along Aristotelian lines when he suggests that the Bible presupposes free will where it announces God's judgement:

> In the preaching of the Church there is included the doctrine respecting a just judgment of God, which, when believed to be true, incites those who hear it to live virtuously, and to shun sin by all means, inasmuch as they manifestly acknowledge that things worthy of praise and blame are within our own power.

The 'pragmatic' presupposition of such a judgement is that human beings are given the means to do—or not to do—as they are told. The imperative only makes sense if it corresponds to an underlying ability.

In the 4th century, however, the Arian controversy opened up a new context for debates about willing. It was one of the typically controversial claims of Arius that Christ was brought into existence 'by the will' of the Father, a claim that was unequivocally opposed by his opponents, first of all by Athanasius. The rationale was this: to say that something had its existence due to the will of the Father meant to make this entity to a considerable extent contingent on a particular act of God. It amounted to much the same as Arius' more famous formulations that the Son was the first creature, that there was 'a once' when he was not etc. The formulae employed in the Nicene Creed, specifically 'of the substance of the Father',

were not least meant to counter this very notion of contingency which would seem to suggest that the Father could be thought of without the Son.

This use of the concept of the will to introduce such an element of contingency into the intratrinitarian relation would, I suppose, more or less agree with our own intuitions. If something exists due to an act of volition, then it is—by the very definition which we normally give to 'volition'—fully contingent on the will of the agent: this precisely is what we normally mean by 'free will'. All the more interesting is the shift in the Orthodox argument that can be observed in this regard in the latter half of the fourth century. Arianism then had its revival in Aetius and, primarily, Eunomius. All the important theologians of that time set out to refute his writings, notably the Cappadocians, Basil and Gregory of Nyssa.

Eunomius, apparently, repeated precisely the view we have found in Arius. Where he argues that the Son was created 'out of nothing' (a claim for which Arius already had had to defend himself) he also seems to back up this claim by reference to the Son's being the object of the Father's volition. In his reply to this argument, Gregory of Nyssa does not, however, reiterate the arguments of the Nicene Fathers of a half century ago. Instead, he goes out of his way to argue that the assumption of the Son's being willed by the Father would be consonant with Orthodoxy:

> Neither does this immediate conjunction (i.e. which he wishes to attribute to the two Persons) exclude the 'willing' of the Father, in the sense that he had a Son without choice, by some necessity of his nature, nor does the 'willing' separate the Son from the Father, coming in between them as some kind of interval: so that we neither reject from our doctrine the 'willing' of the Begetter directed to the Son, as being, so to say, forced by the conjunction of the Son's oneness with the Father, nor do we by any means break that inseparable connection, when 'willing' is regarded as involved in the generation. (III/6)

Given the general theological consensus up to this point, this is quite a remarkable statement. Nevertheless it is not difficult to see why Gregory would have arrived at such a conclusion. The traditional 'Nicene' teaching had accepted, albeit implicitly, (or could, at least, be seen as accepting) the

juxtaposition offered by Arius and reiterated by Eunomius, that the Son was either 'willed' by the Father—but then clearly separate from and subordinated to him—or that he was the product of some 'natural' emission of the substance of the Father. Gregory sees, however, that this alternative is untenable. The generation of the Son, which he wishes to uphold, cannot be thought of as precluding God's active consent, his 'willing' to beget the Son. If this is so, however, then it is equally clear that accepting such a volition on the part of the Father does not involve the kind of separation or subordination which Eunomius seeks to insinuate.

The theological intention, then, is clear. What is the conceptual framework Gregory has to offer to support his claim? His argument is simple. As God is perfect being, so is his will. His will does not involve any contingency; rather, it is as immutable as God is in general:

> In the case of the simple and all-powerful Nature, all things are conceived together and at once, the willing of good as well as the possession of what he wills. For the good and the eternal will is contemplated as operating, indwelling, and co-existing in the eternal Nature, not arising in it from any separate principle, nor capable of being conceived apart from the object of will.

God does not waver, then, but nor is there any separation between his willing and the execution of his intentions. Elsewhere, in his writing on the Hexaemeron, Gregory expresses this thought by saying that wisdom, will and power of God must be conceived of as forming a complete unity. Whatever God—in his wisdom—perceives to be good, he wills and immediately (in the literal sense of the word) this becomes reality.

It is not my task in this paper to follow the consequences this view has or may have for Trinitarian theology or for the doctrine of creation; some problems may be seen as appearing along that road. My point lies with a theory of the will. What is, in this regard, the consequence of Gregory's argument? Gregory is not the first to ascribe a will to God; this, as we have seen, had been done earlier during the Arian controversy. His originality consists in his attempt to address the question of what God's will could be

like—given that God is God. The answer is that, on the assumption of God's perfection, willing cannot, with him, be all the things that we intuitively associate with it. God's willing cannot be connected with a choice and some deliberation; nor can it be in any way separate from action. These, rather, are the specific properties of our human kind of willing. Gregory is quite explicit in this regard:

> For to our heavy and inert nature it properly belongs that the wish and the possession of a thing are not often present with us at the same moment; but now we wish for something we have not, and at another time we obtain what we do not wish to obtain.

The point Gregory makes here would not seem too controversial. The kind of willing that we know from our own deliberations, from our own experience with our actions, our plans, our intentions and their success and failure—all this is, as such, not applicable to God. From this insight one might, however, draw either of two consequences. One of them would be to conclude that, therefore, God does not 'will'. Gregory, however, chooses the other option, that, apparently, all the properties we associate with willing cannot be defining it, as they do not occur in God while he, all the same, wills.

The interesting question, then, is this: why does Gregory choose this latter option. And, consequently, is his choice at all reasonable? Does it help us to reformulate our own understanding of what it means to have free will? As for the first of these questions, Gregory does not, in the present context, address it directly. Nor does he give an explanation that would qualify as an unequivocal answer. Nevertheless, I take it that his answer may be inferred from the following observation. In a passage I have quoted Gregory clearly indicates what are two unacceptable claims about the Son in this particular regard. One is the 'separation' of him from the Father allegedly on account of an act of volition. The other is the concept of some kind of natural determination to which God might be subject. Without going here too deeply into the details of the Trinitarian controversy, I may point out that the latter of the two is one of the most frequent charges

levelled against the Nicene formula, specifically its phrases 'from the substance of the Father' and the *homousion*. I take it, therefore, that Gregory's interest in attributing a will to the Father in his begetting the Son is not least meant to rule out any such notion. When God acts in any way, he acts as a rational, intelligible being (he is *sophia)*, not as some crude primeval nature or matter. In other words, to have free will—with God—means chiefly that all his actions are intimately linked with his wisdom, an expression of his ontological perfection which Gregory—in the Platonic tradition—sees in his being perfectly intelligible.

It would seem plausible that all this must have an influence on the wider question of what willing is and, not least, what it means that we have free will (or not). Let me follow this question; it will lead to a preliminary evaluation of Gregory's decision to attribute willing to god in the way in which we have just seen him do. If God can be said to be willing in the specific way in which only he is capable of doing this and if, as I have just argued, this terminology is chosen even though God's willing is fundamentally different from our own, then the consequence would appear to be this that we fail, more generally, if we seek to define what willing is –and what 'free will' is—if we take our clues only or chiefly from our own experience. We are mistaken, in other words, if we think that willing fundamentally is about deliberation, making choices and being separated from the result of whatever one wills. Not that all this is not involved in willing. On the contrary, it always is—as long as human beings are the subjects of a particular will. From this, however, it does not follow that this characterises willing as such; it characterises only the specific way in which this particular faculty occurs with human beings.

Fundamentally, then, willing means something quite different: namely the fact that rational beings generally relate to themselves and to their world in a way that is different from other beings. Whatever they do or do not do, is not just something that happens to them, but it is something they *do* in an active way and, for this reason, they are, to whatever extent in

particular, in control and can therefore in principle be held responsible for what they are doing. This is true for human beings and for God, but for us it apparently involves problems which do not exist for God. Since we do not have his absolute wisdom, we have to deliberate and choose according to the best of our insight. As we are not almighty, we have to include in our consideration strategies which we might employ to make our intentions happen. We may be hindered to follow a particular course which we thought desirable, and we may choose and follow a course which turns out to have quite undesirable consequences.

Be this, however, as it may, all these features may accompany our own willing, they may inevitably be part of our willing; nevertheless they are not—I still follow the logic of Gregory's argument—characteristic of it *qua* willing. Even for us, then, the accurate definition of our willing capacity would have to point to our rationality and the gift to relate to ourselves and to our environment in a way quite different from other beings with the consequence of accountability and responsibility. At the danger of being perhaps a trifle too stringent, one might say that in this theory the features by which we normally tend to identify free will are, much rather, marks of the inherent deficiencies of our free will. In God all these features are absent—in spite, perhaps rather because of that he is the paradigm of free willing. We can perhaps see what this means for human beings once we think of them analogously. Some rather remarkable consequences would appear to follow. The person who is most expert in doing what is right—i.e. what is in accordance with proper insight—and who, consequently, needs less deliberation or hardly ever thinks about alternative options, is more not less free in this view. He does not have to prove his freedom by committing a sin every once in a while just to check that he is still free to choose. Rather, the fact that he is increasingly less tempted to sin constitutes his increased freedom. While we thus never reach the point where deliberating and choosing looses its relevance for us, they may actually become less relevant during our lives; and this may be good, not bad.

In Gregory we find this position only sketched, and much what I have just added about its relevance and consequences cannot be directly illustrated with quotations from his work. It is evident, however, that the theological tradition, chiefly in Greek speaking theology, followed that lead into precisely the direction I have marked out. It is decidedly developed by Maximus Confessor in the course of the monotheletic controversy, and conveniently summarised by John of Damascus, who was to become a chief authority for the Middle Ages not least on this question. It is, therefore, not so much the position of one particular author and of his specific needs within a doctrinal conflict we are looking at, but Gregory is—which I think is not generally known or not really known at all—perhaps the crucial starting point of what was to become a veritable tradition. Nevertheless, its being (or having been) a tradition does not, as such, make it interesting or viable today which is what this paper essentially is about.

3. So what is the value of this 'different perspective' or different approach that we are offered here to the problem of free will? I think the answer quintessentially is simple enough. If we see that the problem of free will is not primarily or crucially about our ability to make choices, but about our ability to make the right choices, namely the ones which are in accordance with God's will, it becomes evident why we should care about free will in the first place. Why is it important whether we have free will or not? The examples that are often chosen would suggest that it is hardly important at all. As long as I can have my favourite dish from a buffet, it may, frankly, not make any difference at all whether I choose it because of some antecedent cause in my brain or whether there is some actual, genuine choice involved. Things were different, of course, if that cause would regularly force me to eat what I do not like at all, but this point, to the best of my knowledge, is rarely made by proponents of the deterministic thesis. Most probably would agree (including the determinist) that it does make a difference whether we are able to decide whether or not we kill a human

being if we are frustrated or angry. Once again, the interesting question is: why? Some of the modern, scientific determinists seem to suggest that it is only some folly of the human self, some mistaken pride which needs to be removed much as the belief in the central position of the earth has in previous centuries (that's why they propose their new version of a penal code without the notion of guilt). Many of their opponents argue that we cannot do without the ascription, to ourselves and to others, of some choices.

I think that the relevance of free will becomes much more obvious in the theological tradition of which I have here only sketched its historical beginning. This relevance consists fundamentally in the fact that we are endowed with the gift of reason and thus have our own selves and our own lives as tasks which we can solve or fail to solve. Freedom of will thus is not primarily our ability to choose, but our ability to make the right choice, the choice which is in accordance with the person we ought to be. That we have free will, then, is essential for our being the kind of person that we were meant to be. It is decidedly not something we have available as some natural gift, but it is something we can have to a greater or a lesser extent; we may lose it almost entirely. Free will, then, in the way in which I would propose to employ it, is an analogous term which most strictly fits an ideal being, God, whereas human beings participate in this perfection without ever reaching it.

It may be interesting to note that, while this use of freedom of the will is to some extent counterintuitive as far as it concerns the will, it is very much in line with the way in which we often employ the term 'freedom'. One might find a certain irony in the fact that, while we apparently have become quite used to speaking of 'free will' in an almost naturalistic fashion, at the same time few other terms have retained as strong an idealistic ring as 'freedom'. Its existential dimension seems immediately evident to millions of people who know what it means to be liberated from a state of dependency—whether that be political or economic oppression,

addiction to alcohol or drugs, or simply a state of reduced personal opportunities. In all these cases we normally consider freedom as something like an existential quality which is increased in certain situations and thus measured to some extent against an absolute scale.

This 'absolute' use of the term freedom, incidentally, is also, of course, employed by St. Paul. One might even argue that the conspicuous use he makes of the 'law of Christ' as essentially freedom and the need of human beings to be transferred from the 'law of sin' to the 'law of the spirit' is the fundamental root of the theological tradition I wish to recapture. For, while the apostle does not elaborate about the will and the freedom of God, he is quite adamant in his notion of human freedom. It is, once again, not freedom to choose freely: to serve Christ today and tomorrow, for a change, Belial (2 Cor 6,15). The freedom to which we are called consists precisely in the constant and permanent submission under the law of Christ.

Perhaps, then, to be in keeping with standard usage, I might formulate my intention as a proposition to emphasise, when speaking of free will, more the word 'free' than the word 'will'. Our will, Gregory and those after him teach us, is free not because it can choose—this is something it naturally can, but insofar as it chooses what for us is right to choose. And the right choice is the one that expresses as well as increases our own freedom and that of others.

One might go as far as to say that, looked at from this perspective, the difference between the determinist and the compatibilist position appears rather small. That we make choices, that this is, on a certain level of description, a crucial feature of human life, even most determinists would probably not deny. As long as it matters little whether we decide one way or another, the question of whether those choices are fundamentally an expression of some natural causes or whether they are somehow 'our own' may arguably not be quite relevant. For proponents of the theological tradition, which I have here tried to sketch, this could certainly have

appeared in this way. For them, the faculty of making choices is part of what human beings are, but it is, as such, of limited relevance as it may evidently be used in ways that constitute anything but freedom of will.

A rather more crucial question would appear, from their angle, whether this freedom of will was something human beings could aspire to on their own, what role was played by the fall and by sinning and what, respectively, by the saving grace of God. This is the topic of a separate paper, but it is crucial to see that, what appears as one of the big controversies of theology grows quite naturally out of the understanding of free will developed in the foregoing.

Rather more immediately relevant for the purpose of this paper is another question that may seem to arise. I have started my argument by sketching briefly the current discussion about free will between the neurosciences and philosophy and proposed that theology has something to say which is not normally heard in those discourses. We may now seem to face a well-known dilemma. Either we put the position that I have here tried to develop into the strictly theological terms which I have used and indicated—then we will almost certainly face the objection that they do no longer carry much relevance in a world where too many would not share some of the most basic premises of theological discourse. Or we rephrase the position to accommodate it to that debate—then it may no longer be recognised as a theological contribution.

I think there is an answer to this dilemma which can be briefly sketched as follows. The understanding of theology has always been (or this, at least, is what I understand) that its operation with specific categories is not meant to create a hermetic discourse, but that they all signify something that can reasonably be understood once we open our eyes to the world as it is. I think that the success or failure of a theological contribution to the debate about free will is largely dependent on its ability to demonstrate that its

underlying idea of the human being captures essential features of what human beings, of what we really are. This, I take it, has been the great strength of theology in the past, and I cannot see why it should not be a strength now. The challenges are there for all to see. Once we adjust to the perspective that I have proposed, we can perceive, I think, that they go far beyond the radical naturalism of some scientists. A challenge to an understanding of free will based on the possibility to choose in favour of a notion that sees free will as the ability to make the right decision, flies in the face of assumptions so commonly held that they influence the lives of many people without any philosophical training. Nevertheless they feel that they have to assert the existence of their own free will by making the most imprudent choices simply in order to make choices because that is, supposedly, how you prove that you have free will. Having been in a partnership for so many years they feel that they need to have an affair for a change; having been honest for all their lives, they might feel that they express their own selves by doing some cheating for a turn. Many examples could be added. This is not to aver, of course, that to exercise the human capacity to change and to work on long-standing patterns of behaviour is of and in itself bad; on the contrary, it can be quite crucial. It is to say, however, that change as such does not make us happier, it does not add to our humanity or, in the language of this paper, it does not constitute or prove our free will. For the latter it may be much more relevant that we manage to persevere in attitudes and actions in accordance with what we know we should be. If we change, it matters that we change in the right direction. Since we do not know necessarily what this is or what decisions it may involve, the crucial role of deliberation and choice is kept intact, but not as an end in itself. The end, rather, is that freedom of the will that guides us to the good. To have this as an infallible guide is now an object of hope, but this hope should prevent us from finding ultimate fulfilment in the vain choices of this world.