

# Free Will: Pro and Con

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## The curious human quality

**F**ree will is a phenomenon that is difficult not only to understand, but also to observe, analyze, and describe. Does free will even exist? In what form does it exist? What powers does it have? How does it “work”? How does it interact with necessity? How should freedom be rightly used? What does the Bible say about it? Such is the range of questions that this article will attempt to answer.

The opinions of scholars concerning free will and even concerning the reality of its existence are quite contradictory. Some acknowledge its existence, observing the evidence of free will in practical life. Others consider it a myth, since they are convinced that everything in the world is subject to rigid laws that exclude the existence of this curious quality of human nature. For some people it is excessively dangerous, because it always contains the potential for evil. For others it is the condition of all good action because without it, true effort, achievement, and heroism are impossible. All these positions are agreed upon only one thing: free will contains an element of risk and must be used carefully. Gennady Gololob (born 1964) is the author of a number of publications on systematic theology and apologetics that have appeared in various Christian periodicals and on the Internet. In 2001 he received a Bachelor of Theology degree from Donetsk Christian University. In 2008 his book, *Svoboda voli: Mezhdurabstvom i proizvolom* (Free will: Between slavery and arbitrary fate) was published by *Bibliia dlia vseh* (The Bible for all). Presently he is the theological editor of Smyrna Publishers (Cherkassy, Ukraine).

Free will is usually set up as the opposite of compulsion; however this is not true, or at least not always. Like compulsion, free



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will can be either good or evil; however, unlike compulsion it has an unexpected quality—it is changeable and therefore reversible. The extent of its reversibility and the conditions of its ability to make an opposite choice are the subject of endless discussions among specialists. The reversibility of human choice explains why free will is both praised and condemned. When it refuses a bad choice and takes the way of correction, it is hailed as divine. When it turns away from a good decision to the side of evil and follows a destructive path, it is denied, persecuted, and damned. However, in spite of all its contradictions, it is God's gift to people, although it is the most dangerous gift of all!

What does it mean that free will is part of our nature and supported by God? Because a human is not the result of the actions of blind natural forces, but rather a being with a Creator, it is impossible to understand human free will without understanding God's intention concerning this phenomenon. In other words, it is only by taking the biblical position that we can truly understand what freedom is generally and human free will specifically.

#### Various disciplines concerning free will

Free will is considered a subject of several disciplines: physiology, psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Naturally, in each field there are both opponents and advocates of free will. Generally, physiologists attempt to explain spontaneous human behavior in excessively "earth-bound" terms, as random departures from inherited inclinations (Lorenz, Pavlov). Freud

<sup>[1]</sup> B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (London: Penguin, 1973), 210.

severely limited the power of the laws of heredity by studying the mechanism of the functioning of the subconscious. The instinctive approach, by the way, is clearly inadequate for a complete description of human behavior. For example, it is incapable of explaining such psychological phenomena as the promptings of conscience, internal conflict, repentance, and even doubt, timidity, or resignation. Fatalistically, he divided all people into the categories of either altruists or egoists without permitting any transfer from one camp to the other.

For a time in psychology the belief in the existence of the human soul persisted, but toward the beginning of the last century it was rejected when J. B. Watson asserted in 1912 that the subject of study must be *behavior*, and not human consciousness. Thereafter, psychology became simply the slave of sociological methodology, reducing human behavior to the deterministic influence of social surroundings. Watson is considered the founder of the behaviorist school of psychology which was developed by B. F. Skinner. The latter stated his conviction that it was possible to "program desirable behavior" in any human being by changing the external circumstances of his or her life. He concludes his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971) with the words: "We have not yet seen what man can make of man."<sup>[1]</sup>

Psychology so lightly dispensed with the study of human consciousness on the grounds that only the external behavior of humans is accessible to scientific observation and therefore capable of offering scientists objective data for analysis. The true reason for this false assumption was the lack of acceptance of the philosophical and religious assumptions concerning the

existence of the soul, mind, or conscience. Naturally, because of this approach human consciousness was deprived of its native independence (autonomy). Incidentally, a number of psychologists (for example, James, Fromm, Frankl, Chomsky) retreated from this position, recognizing autonomy from external (social) and internal (genetic) factors in human behavior. In this way, forcing sociological approaches to methodology on psychology reduced its value to nothing. Sociology explained human behavior just as physiology did, except that in place of the laws of heredity it set up utopian social principles along the lines of Marxist determinism.

Philosophers related to the issue of free will much more seriously, splitting into numerous different streams over the question (from vulgar materialism to intuition and existentialism). Thinkers who reject on principle the existence of chance in the world and free will in humans are known as determinists. Their opponents, who are inclined to see self-sufficiency in free will and the world's diversity, are referred to as voluntarists. In other words, the determinists ascribe all chance in the world to inevitability or compulsion, while the voluntarists do the opposite.

Representatives of the first group (for example, Golbach, La Mettrie, Laplace) considered a human being part of a mechanically constructed universe; therefore, to a great extent they excluded human independence. In this they were in accord with the views of the ancient Stoics, who taught that "the fates lead the obedient and drag the disobedient." It is not sur-

prising that Golbach called free will a complete "chimera."<sup>[2]</sup>

In the history of philosophy this approach, which dominated in antiquity, was displaced by alternatives in the New Era.

Adherents of voluntarism (for example, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Bergson), on the contrary, distinguish man from the ordered world precisely by his self-directed behavior. The most extreme expression of this position is that of absolute free will. For example, Albert Camus insisted on the understanding of free will as an absolutely indifferent choice:

"... Everything is permissible and nothing has meaning. There are no conclusions 'for' or 'against,' and it is impossible to either judge or justify a murderer. There is no difference between incinerating people in gas ovens and dedicating one's life to caring for lepers. Virtue and malice aforethought are a matter of chance and caprice."<sup>[3]</sup>

It would appear that the opposition of these two theories of free will is unavoidable. However, since each of them has exposed certain problems, it is inevitable that a third option would appear that would attempt to avoid the insufficiencies of the two previous systems. We will call the representatives of this intermediate position "centrists." The philosophers who take this position are, first of all, Descartes, Leibnitz, Wolff, and Kant. They considered that the world does not always nor completely submit to physical laws, but interacts both with random processes and intentional human will, which possesses a certain kind of autonomy. In their view, human free will is a particular form of existence rooted in transcendent reality. As Viktor Frankl says, the

<sup>[2]</sup> P. Golbach, *Zdravyi smysl'* (Moscow, 1941), 60.

<sup>[3]</sup> A. Camus, *Buntuiushchiy chelovek. Filosofiya. Politika. Iskusstvo.* (Moscow, 1990), 121-122.

“... free mind of a human being raises itself above the laws that direct nature and acts according to its own higher level of being, which is autonomous, in spite of its dependence upon lower levels of being.”<sup>[4]</sup>

On this basis human will can independently choose its goal, that is, create a new cause-result chain of events. If the goal has a moral character, it is possible to view a human being as a self-directed and even a self-determined “nature.”

This position is expressed as follows by the well-known Russian thinker and pedagogue, Konstantin Ushinskiy:

Independent rational process is a quality of humankind alone: only a human being, often with a noticeable effort of his nervous system, seeks differentiation, commonality, connection, and reasons where they are not visible. With this goal he selects his arbitrarily- or unarbitrarily-created suppositions and concepts, connects the ones that connect, separates those that must be separated, and seeks new ones. The source of this freedom in the rational process of man is found in the freedom of his soul, in its self-consciousness, for free will as we see it in its consequences may be possessed only by a being that has the capability not only of wanting, but of recognizing its spiritual act of wanting: only with this condition can we oppose our own desire.<sup>[5]</sup>

On this basis, V. Skuhomlinskiy, a follower of Ushinskiy’s pedagogical school, spoke of the necessity of developing “the ability to direct one’s desires.”

Naturally, the centrist position could not satisfy either extreme determinists or extreme voluntarists. It cannot satisfy the

first group, because it calls the will a false sensation without any basis in reality, nor the second, because it considers humans incapable of dealing with the very willfulness of their own will. If, in the thinking of determinists, man is a slave to external circumstances, then according to voluntarists he is the slave of his own impulses. Free will is obliged to avoid those two extremes as Fedor Stepun states:

“Separated from truth, freedom turns into waywardness, to anarchy, to a battle against everyone; separated from the personality it turns into passive obedience, into a disciplinary battalion of the Jesuit order-, Prussian military-, or Bolshevik party-type.”<sup>[6]</sup>

It develops that determinism binds up free will too tightly while voluntarism releases it. It is the latter that looks most Utopian. Jean-Jacques Rousseau spoke against the notion of absolute human freedom although he had great sympathy for the idea of freedom. He asserted that complete human freedom is impossible because it is limited by its own existence. For a person to achieve absolute freedom he would have to put to death not only all the people around him and even God, but also himself. Human nature is confined even by its natural limitations. However, Rousseau was not completely correct since man is not confined in his consciousness even by the material circumstances of life. Thus, he can remember, abstract, dream, imagine, plan, etc. However, the well-known French thinker was completely correct in that absolute freedom of action is impossible for a mortal. In this sphere of its manifestation, free will cannot be absolute.

<sup>[4]</sup> V. Frankl, *Chelovek v posikakh smysla* (Moscow: Progress, 1990), 162-163.

<sup>[5]</sup> K. D. Ushinskiy, *Pedagogicheskie sochineniia*, 6

vols. (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1990), 5:457.

<sup>[6]</sup> F. A. Stepun, *O svobode: Opyt russkogo liberalizma* (Moscow, 1997), 358.

The centrist position brought the argument right inside human consciousness. The question of the relationship between will, feelings, and the mind in human consciousness took on particular urgency. Supporters of voluntarism in psychology insist on the opinion that not the mind but the will is the deciding factor of psychological life. Actually, man is the only being capable of going against the dictates of his own mind, which can be seen in suicide, for example. However, does that mean that the human being is obliged to perform a certain action? Absolutely not; the will is not obliged to refuse the mind. Leslie Stevenson, in his book, *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, wrote: "The concept of free action in no way assumes that such an action has no cause at all (that would make it random, which means that it could scarcely depend on the one performing it) but assumes that it takes place on account of a choice on the part of the subject. And we can continue to consider people responsible for the actions that they chose for themselves, even if we suppose that the choice itself is not without a cause."<sup>[7]</sup>

Nevertheless, the conclusions of the mind are only a pretext and not the reason for a decision made by the will. "Our 'self' cannot remain a passive observer of motives and must intervene in the threatening 'nothingness' of motives or abstain temporarily from the decision."<sup>[8]</sup> In this way, in spite of the battle being waged within human consciousness not only of feelings and opinions but also motives, the making of a *final* decision, upon which a concrete, conscious act depends, is made under the "supervision" of the human will alone. In

this sense, the will can reject even the absolute knowledge given to people by God Himself as inapplicable. Here we must cross over into the realm of biblical and then systematic theology.

### Free will in the Bible

The centrist position of secular thinkers is close to the biblical point of view. According to the Bible, a human being carries two natures: material and spiritual. The first is subservient to the laws of physical reality while the second is not. The first is called freedom of action, the second—freedom of desire and both types of freedom, of course, are also distinguished in science. Interior freedom, naturally, experiences the battle of differing motives, feelings and rational conclusions, but those things do not have the same power over it as the laws of nature do over the freedom of external actions. Influence plays a part here, but not compulsion, which will be discussed presently. Even "original sin" does not have absolute power over human consciousness (Ro 7:18-19).

An example of the arbitrary quality of free will is the case of the differing reactions of the two sons to their father's command in Christ's parable. "There was a man with two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go" (see Mt 21:28-32). As we see, human free will assumes not only the turning from good to evil as Augustine mistakenly taught, but

<sup>[7]</sup> L. Stevenson, D. Haberman, *Ten Theories of Human Nature* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 3rd ed., 1998, Russian edition: Slovo, 2004), accessed at: <http://yanko.lib.ru/books/philosoph/>

stevenson=10\_theories\_of\_human\_nature=ann.htm.  
<sup>[8]</sup> S. A. Levitskiy, *Tragediia svobody* (Frankfurt: Posev, 1984), 14.

also from evil to good. It is worth noting that Christ compared two whole categories of people with these two sons: Pharisees and tax collectors.

Does the fact of the reversibility of free will represent a particular sort of necessity? Is this arbitrariness insurmountable? No, because the Word of God indicates the possibility of unconditional influence on free will by truth and love, at least. This means that the will is capable of self-limitation and self-control. For example, knowledge of the truth has an educative significance for free will. Since moral knowledge is capable of influencing the arbitrariness of free will, we talk about the necessity of training, especially during childhood. Proverbs 20:5 contains this important truth: "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out." Thus, knowledge plays an important role in awakening the will to self-control and spiritual discipline without forcing it to choose. This is in complete agreement with Stevenson's opinion given above.

A sinner's free will is not only realized in evil. He is capable of good, at least in the sphere of his own convictions and intentions (Lk 6:32; Ro 7:18). God's grace acts through unbelieving people and in their external life by using this interior capability. Because free will is not completely destroyed in a sinner, we may expect him to agree to God's offer of salvation (Gen 4:7; Isa 45:22; Jer 33:3; Ez 18:30; Joel 2:12-14; Zach 1:3; Mal 3:7; Mt 16:24; Ac 5:4; Jas 4:7-10; 1Co 6:12; 7:36; 9:17; 2Co 8:17; Col 2:18; Phlm 14; Heb 10:23; 12:10). If a sinner was completely dead spiritually, it would make more sense to bury him, not save him.

Thus, we see that the punishment for the sin of Adam that reached all humanity affected only the human body and there-

fore was temporary, not eternal; earthly and not spiritual; reversible and not final. God did not deprive Adam in Eden of all His grace, but left for him sufficient to provide people with the capability of judging their own sin and calling out to God for help. In this way, the action of "original sin" irreversibly working on the earthly side of human nature was opposed by prevenient grace (Jn 1:9; 6:44; Ac 17:27; Ro 2:4). It strengthens the weak will of a human being, awakening it from spiritual paralysis and ignorance and thus makes a person capable of accepting salvation by faith and repentance (Mt 23:37; Lk 13:1-7; Jn 5:40; 6:67; Ac 13:46). Since this general grace prepares human consciousness to recognize its personal sinfulness and rouses it to seek salvation, God expects a certain answer from it to His invitation to be saved (Dt 4:29; Ps 26:9; Isa 45:19; Jer 29:13-14; Mt 23:37; Lk 11:2-13; Jn 5:40; Ac 17:27; 2Co 4:2; Gal 6:10; 1Ti 4:10; Heb 3:7-8; 4:2; 5:9).

If free will has the capacity in part (if only in its desire) to overcome the effects of "original sin," how can it be free from the predestination of God? In principle, this is impossible; however, Scripture does not characterize the Lord's will as irresistible. On the contrary, it depicts God's predestination, at least in the question of salvation, as conditional and limited by His foreknowledge of the future desires of a human being. For example, the Lord "knew" in advance the behavior not only of the faithful, but also of the unfaithful (Gen 18:21; Ex 3:19; 1Pe 2:9), but His foreknowledge did not ordain them to destruction. Accordingly, His foreknowledge and predestination (Ro 8:29) do not have an absolute, but a conditional character. God does not select people for certain kinds of tasks arbitrarily, but seeks humble people who are conscious of their dependence on Him

(Ps. 37:11; 40:4; 149:4; Pro 15:33; 29:23).

If this is the situation of an unbeliever, then the freedom of Christian places upon him full responsibility for his own salvation. According to 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22: "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil." Before "avoiding" it, we must define "evil." Here God has not left the human who wishes to listen to Him without any kind of direction. Other NT texts also testify that the question of defining evil and good depends on God, who has given people the criteria according to which "everything" must be tested. In other words, in the NT teaching on freedom, human will is presented as dependence on the knowledge of God, as well as the free relationship to that knowledge. The will needs help, but it does some things independently all the same.

Paul's teaching about the freedom of human will in consciousness and the lack of freedom in action (Ro 7:14-25) shows the two-sided nature of the problem of freedom. In his conception, human freedom has two levels: the exterior (behavior) and interior (consciousness). Human freedom is strictly limited in its actions, so that what is desired is not always realized in practice. In such cases one must show forbearance to a person who does not achieve what he attempts. He can attain the necessary result, but later, not right away. This is why Christ forgave the *acts* of the tax collectors and prostitutes but judged the *thoughts* of the Pharisees in spite of their flawless behavior.

Without question, knowledge of the truth is absolutely essential for the spiritual expression of freedom and the realization of the goal of moral perfection. In this sense unfettered freedom must be understood as spiritual slavery, while slavery to righteousness is true freedom, since it al-

lows man to reject the evil of his own will (Jn 8:36; Ro 8:16). When free will voluntarily chooses spiritual slavery, self-limitation and self-definition are the result (they are rooted in its very choice).

The NT concept of human free will is based on the theological conviction of the non-compulsory character of the will of God. This explains why the grace of God, upon meeting with stubborn and conscious human resistance, offers the possibility of rejecting the invitation to salvation and God's efforts to save (Job 37:23; Mt 18:33-34; 21:43; 22:12-13; 23:37; Mk 10:21; Lk 4:28-29 (cf. 4:22); 8:13; 9:53; Jn 5:40; 6:67; 8:46; 10:36; 15:5-6; Ac 14:6-20; 26:19; Jude 4-6; Ro 8:13; 10:16; 1Co 10:1-12; Gal 5:13; Col 1:23; Heb 4:2; 6:6-8; Rev 3:20). Only the conditional nature of the offer and of the saved state of a given individual can explain the instances described in the Bible of falling away from grace and faith in God (1Sa 10:1 [cf. 1Sa 9:16-17]; 1Ki 11:4.9-10 [cf. 1Chr 28:9]; Jer 17:13; Ez 18:24.26; 33:18; Mt 10:33; 13:11-15.21; Mk 4:17; 14:21; Lk 8:9.10.13; 15:24; 22:32; Jn 16:1; Jas 4:4; 2Pe 2:1; 1Jn 2:15; Ro 11:20-23; 1Co 6:9-10; 8:11; 15:2; Gal 5:21; Col 2:6-8; 1Thes 3:2-5; 1Ti 3:6; 2Ti 4:10 [cf. Col 4:14; Phlm 24]; Heb 6:12; 10:26-27).

Naturally, the conditional nature of the acceptance of salvation as a gift assumes a certain form of synergy or interaction. The textual basis of the synergetic concept is found in such NT passages as Mt 25:29; Mk 16:20; Lk 17:5-6; 2Pe 1:5.8; Ro 1:10; 8:26; 1Co 10:13; 2Co 1:10-11; 9:10; Phil 1:19. God's grace anticipates certain answering actions from human beings, and is only given on that condition. An example of a biblical variety of synergy in the acceptance of salvation is Isa 59:1-2: "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniq-

uities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” As we see, God can (and wants to) save all people, but people’s sins (or, more precisely, their internal attachment to those sins) *will not allow* Him to accomplish that intention. Why? Because God tolerates evil only up to a certain point (Gen 15:16; Jer 44:22; Ez 7:4.9; Mt 23:32-33; 1Thes 2:16).

That God’s will or His predestination do not limit human free will is evident in God’s conditional prophecies or in such examples as the text of 1Sa 23:7-13. Turning to God by means of the priestly ephod, David received God’s answer concerning the intentions of the people of Keilah to betray him into the hands of Saul. Before us is the fact of the foreknowledge of God. Does it have an inevitable character? No, because David left the city in time so that the action God foresaw did not occur. Meanwhile, the demonstration of David’s free will is evident as well. If David did not hurry to go into hiding, the intentions of the people of Keilah could have become reality. God warned David not of a possible, but of a real danger. Consequently, God preferred not simply to take David out of the hands of his enemies, but to affect his own foresight, inasmuch as David sought God’s counsel. It develops that David’s foresight did not coincide with God’s prediction, and the event did not take place. It follows that that not everything that is foreknown is foreordained, because not every prediction comes true. This view of God’s omniscience is called conditional foreknowledge, because its realization depends on conditions to be fulfilled from the human side, which are therefore changeable and reversible.

God’s desire to save all people without exception eloquently testifies to the non-

compulsory will of God (Mt 11:28; Mk 16:15; Jn 1:29; 3:16-17; 12:32; Ac 4:12; 2Pe 3:9; 1Jn 2:2; Ro 10:12.18; 11:32; 14:15; 1Co 8:11; 2Co 5:15.19; Phil 2:6-11; 1Ti 2:4.6; 4:10; Tit 2:11; Heb 2:9.15; Rev 22:17). If God desires something, but does not insist upon His desire, it means that His will is conditional and is not achieved by force. Since God has moral reasons for His self-limitation, the non-compulsory and conditional character of His influence on people explains why a human being can resist that influence.

In NT theology God is characterized by a certain patience toward wayward humanity (Lk 13:8; Jn 12:47-48; 1Pe 3:20; 2Pe 3:9.15; Ro 2:4; 3:26), which allows Him to delay when repentance is lacking (for example, the case of Israel at the time of Moses and later) or cancel the punishment of the guilty when repentance is present (for example, the case of the Ninevites, Ahab, Hezekiah). For this reason God quickly and decisively punishes only the extreme manifestations of evil expressed primarily in the form of pride (for example, Nebuchadnezzar or Belshazzar), while He gives ordinary sinners a chance to repent and the possibility of correction with His help (Pro 14:17).

### Free will in Christian theology

Free will in Christian theology has been argued from two positions: Augustine’s teaching on “original sin” and Calvin’s teaching on absolute predestination. Augustine was the first in the history of Christian theology to proclaim that God saves a human being without disclosing His intentions. “If a blessing must be given to a human being, he will certainly be blessed, but if it is never to be given to him, he will never desire it” (“On Rebuke and Grace,”



paragraph 34). “God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, predestining us for adoption, not because we intended by ourselves to be holy and blameless, but He chose and predestined us so that we might be such” (“On the Predestination of the Saints,” paragraph 57). As we see, here is not a single word about the Fall. It is a meaningless term when God is sovereign both to destroy and save.

True, at first Augustine did not express the thought that any agreement of God with people concerning His actions contradicts the supremacy of His power. He simply taught that sinful man is in no condition either to deserve salvation or to desire it as a gift. The sin of Adam simply deprived him of free will: “It is not human will that achieves grace by means of freedom, but rather freedom that is achieved by means of grace” (“On Rebuke and Grace,” 8.17).

However, Augustine allowed a vexing error into the question. The fact is that in order to receive salvation, God does demand something from a human being. Of course, it is not works, but faith and repentance. Augustine knew this, but squirmed out of the situation in quite a strange way: instead of us, God does the very thing that He demands. However, when the question of salvation is set out that way, at least one thing fails to add up. Must God repent in place of the sinner? Must He really experience all the pain and horror of our fallen state every second? Is it not we ourselves who must experience all the tormenting consequences of our own evil? Of course, God is ashamed for us, but not in place of us. It is our own guilt that we must acknowledge so as not to be destroyed. And God switching places with us by itself is not sufficient. We must agree of our own free will. This is our own action, which God

can only facilitate, and not cause in a one-sided way.

Being convinced that God does not permit, but only causes everything in our lives, Augustine encountered the problem of a lack of correspondence between real experience and the basic tenets of his theory. If God is good and all-powerful, then how could there be evil on earth? In searching for an answer to that question Augustine arrived at a desperate conclusion from the Christian point of view: evil has a place on earth because God Himself wanted it there, whether passively or permissively. In this way Augustine tried to explain the presence of evil and the existence of hell. This is the basis of his demand for the physical punishment of heretics: “Who can love us more than God? However, He does not cease not only to teach us with blessing, but also to terrify us with effectiveness.”

Here again, however, there is a difficulty awaiting Augustine: it is impossible to use the idea of “original sin” to explain the origin of the evil of Satan and fallen angels. Desperately struggling over the answer to this question, here Augustine was obliged to introduce evil into the very nature of God—at least in the form of the doctrine of double predestination of some created beings to salvation and others to destruction. Thus, the world was divided into two camps in such a way that crossing over from one into the other or back again was impossible. From this, Augustine gave human free will space to move either within good or within evil. It could not choose between one or the other. It follows that some people became the objects of God’s mercy while others became the objects of His hatred. In this way, to the unconditional right of God to violence or good was added the concept of “election,” understood not in a gospel but a Manichean

sense. By the end of his life Augustine began to express ideas close to the ones that John Calvin would put forward one thousand years later.

In general, Augustine permitted two vexing errors: he both turned God into a dictator, permitting no one any kind of freedom, and also turned the human being into a complete nothing, from whom the “image of God” had disappeared completely. Augustine could not understand that absolute arbitrariness in the will of God was not a positive quality, but a fault. This concept meant that God was deprived of the right to control His own will, with the ability in equal measure to save or destroy people, doing it absolutely randomly, even in relationship to one and the same sinner. However, Augustine distorted the biblical concept not only of the nature of God, but also of humanity. He did not notice a certain significant ability in the sinner which the Lord had no desire to overturn, but to transform—humility. Humility is not a sin, but a great virtue; a virtue attainable not only by Christians, but by unredeemed people. Without it, repentance is impossible and, it follows, forgiveness. It is this very quality that God made the condition on the human side for receiving His priceless mercy. The crux of Augustine’s error was expressed in simple words by Bernard of Clairvaux: “Take away free will and there will be nothing to save; take away grace, and there will be nothing with which to save.” If in the Pelagian heresy there was no need for a Savior, so in the heresy of Augustine there is nothing to save. Which view contains the greater heresy is up to the reader to decide.

The question of the character of predestination lead to the conflicting views of theologians such as John Calvin and Jacob Arminius. Calvin held that God does not permit any freedom in the world He created, but predestined *all*, which assertion means that “all” must include evil. Thus, no questions of morality may be applied to God, including the question of why “some are predestined for eternal life and others for eternal damnation.”<sup>[9]</sup>

Unlike Calvin, Arminius did not regard God’s will as absolute, neither regarding destruction or salvation. “If [God] decided to use force which... creation may resist, it means that the occurrence of an event is not *inevitable*, but *permitted*, although its actual outcome is certainly known by God in advance.”<sup>[10]</sup> And if anyone doubts this, thoughtlessly considering the Lord an absolute tyrant, then let him pay attention to the words of Jesus Christ: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Mt 23:37). It is significant that of the two wills in conflict, the one that gives way is God’s. It is an unimaginable fact, bordering on the absurd, from the point of view of Calvinistic theology!

Arminius decided the problem of the servitude of the will due to “original sin” by means of the teaching on prevenient grace, which he considered universal. The latter neutralized the consequences of “original sin” to such an extent that human will became capable of responding to God’s call to salvation. Therefore God de-

<sup>[9]</sup> Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, w. y.), 2:925.

<sup>[10]</sup> Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3 vols.,

trans. by James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 1:291.

mands faith from man, but does not manufacture it, “He established it to give man sufficient grace so that he might believe.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Thus, according to Arminius, human will is capable of believing by reason of a non-compulsory action such as the redemption of Christ, as well as the universal action of the Holy Spirit. “By himself” (this is an important phrase for Arminius) man is not capable of desiring the good, but prevenient grace makes him capable of it. In other words, just as God can *theoretically* do anything, but *in practice* cannot do evil, so *in theory* human will *by itself* cannot desire good, but *in fact* is always capable of it thanks to the unconditional and universal action of prevenient grace.

### The necessary self-limitation of free will

Why, then, is God so patient toward initial and individual sins and so intolerant of subsequent and protracted sins? This is related to the qualities of human will. To realize a completely conscious choice, which is the only one that can take full responsibility for itself, free will must encounter not only good, but also evil, and both of them in full measure, besides. Only after this encounter can the choice between them be conscious and, consequently, responsible. Until that encounter, free will is in the state of a childish whim. It cannot choose consciously, because it does not have the experience to know the consequences of the two alternatives.

Free will learns evil, of course, from personal disobedience to the Lord’s will. It also comes to recognize the adversarial nature of evil toward its own nature, which carries within itself the created “image of

God.” Of course, there is a price to pay for this first recognition of evil. It is the punishment that directly reflects on its earthly fate; however it does not relate to a human being’s eternal state. The final judgment for sin may be anticipated only with the repeated or actually systematic committing of sin. Sinning repeatedly and against one’s own internal protest as well as God’s, the will “accustoms itself” to sin to such an extent (Ps 37:8; Mt 24:12), that at last it loses its ability to judge the sin (Jer 13:23; 2Ti 2:25).

In this way, the most important thing for God is not the fact that a person sinned, but rather what he will do with that sin. As Frankl stated, “A man is not free from circumstances. But he is free to take a position in relation to them. Circumstances do not oblige him totally. Within the boundaries of his limitations, it depends on him whether he will give in to those conditions.”<sup>[12]</sup> It follows that free will may allow itself to *try* everything, including evil; however it does not have the moral right to *remain* in evil and yet be a friend of truth.

Free or autonomous will upon encountering God’s truth will experience such great changes that it cannot remain in the childish state of innocent freedom. Truth places it in a state of unavoidable choice so that every decision of the will—for the side of good or evil—draws it closer to one or the other. If the will chooses the good, it will be easier to accept the subsequent good; if it chooses evil, it will be still more inclined to evil. Truth is summoned to help the will establish itself in good, but it does not compel. It is no accident that Dostoevsky set up religious values in opposition to the unrestrained, arbitrary, senseless human will: “In finding Christ, man finds himself.”

Naturally, secular moral values are also illuminated by divine authority because

<sup>[11]</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:383.

<sup>[12]</sup> Frankl, *Chelovek v posikakh smysla*, 77.

they are based on the testimony of the voice of conscience. All knowledge is capable of helping the will choose self-criticism and self-limitation which are its only means of survival. If it remains in its childish (initial) state, free will condemns itself to self-degradation and the loss of spiritual identity; at the very least it loses its capacity for self-control and consequently repentance. When a human being is incapable of repentance, he becomes a subject of “hardness of heart,” which is accomplished in the end by God. Such people cannot be saved and they are in the complete power of the devil, the enemy of human souls.

Now it becomes clear that free will has not one, but two enemies: external compulsion which places all of its responsibility on another and internal compulsion, which refuses all responsibility. Actually, for the realization of conscious action of free will it is essential to search for the condition between complete external lawlessness and complete internal lawlessness of the will. Thus, free will must be taught to avoid subjugation to both external forces that render it helpless, as well as to its own whim, which makes it a hostage to itself. Rousseau was right when he said, “If you want to see your greatest enemy, take a look in the mirror.” A person deprived of his capacity for self control is not capable of any more moral or spiritual acts than a person who is ruled from without.

Immanuel Kant especially emphasized the fact of the internal struggle that is always taking place in the human soul and the obligation to confine the evil part of one’s will:

“Wisdom, consisting in the agreement of a being’s will with its final goal, is needed by a person first of all in the development of the effort to remove internal barriers (evil that has taken root in the will), and then to cultivate the first never-to-be-lost deposit of good will...”<sup>[13]</sup>

Erich Fromm declares the right of a human being to order his own fate even independently of God:

The business of a person is to make a choice; no one, no God can “save” him. This principle is depicted with particular clarity in the answer God gives Samuel when the Israelites wanted to have a king (1Sa 8:9). After Samuel gave them a vivid description of eastern despotism and the people wanted a king all the same, God said, “Listen to them and give them a king” (1Sa 8:22). A similar spirit of choice is reflected in the following verse: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life...” (Dt 30:19). A person can choose. God cannot save him. All God can do is place him before the principle alternative of life and death and command him to choose life.<sup>[14]</sup>

Thus, among other things, a human being is an independent agent or the beginning of a certain sequence of cause-effect events. As psychologist Magda B. Arnold states: “Every choice has a reason, but its reason is in the one doing the choosing.”<sup>[15]</sup> A human being has the right to relate in a sovereign way to various external and internal determinants of his or her behavior. He may even fear in different ways and for various periods of time, because he is above fear as such, although he does not always realize it. Of

<sup>[13]</sup> Quoted from *Mysliteli raznykh epoch o sovesti* (Moscow: Eticheskaja mysl’, 1990), 284-293.

<sup>[14]</sup> Erich Fromm, *Dusha cheloveka* (Moscow: Res-

publika, 1992), 106.

<sup>[15]</sup> M. B. Arnold, *The Human Person* (New York, 1954), 40.

course, we must recognize that in a certain sense we choose salvation or destruction for ourselves, even if we do not know all of their conditions.

If there is no free will, then man cannot be either punished or rewarded. If that is so, any discussion of holiness and guilt is empty noise. In that case, man is merely a slave of circumstances that have nothing to do with him. And here it makes no difference who provides the circumstances, whether the state or God. Helping a person understand his independence, at least interiorly, of circumstances that influence him, is the basic task of pastoral counseling. There is no condition of sinfulness from which a person cannot be freed, certainly with God's help. Max Scheller pointed out that a human being has the right to be guilty and punished, and if he is regarded as a mere victim of circumstance that deals a heavy blow to his will to change.<sup>[16]</sup> Thus, only when a person is free can he properly accept responsibility.

### Influencing free will

Naturally, training the sense of responsibility does not assume that a person is given absolute freedom. Freedom is only one of the conditions of responsible human behavior. Arbitrary choice does not submit to moral or religious demands, precisely because it is arbitrary. Thus, a small child is free in a way that an adult could never be, but we would never punish him in the way we would punish an adult. His freedom does not achieve the level of what we may call responsible freedom. What factors can affect it, without crossing over into compulsion?

<sup>[16]</sup> See Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man* (New York: Harper, 1960).

Existentialists say that freedom of the will cannot be subdued in principle. For them, any choice of freedom is first and foremost a risk. Inarguably the risk does not demand either knowledge or sensation, merely irresponsible risk. Even the risk that we connect to the expression of faith is not that. A beneficial risk can never be compared with reckless suicide because it is not indifferent. A person must be convinced at the very least that there are no valid reasons contradicting the risky decision or behavior.

The extreme voluntarist position does not consider the right of free will over itself. That is why it is free will, in order to be capable of self-limitation and self-control, not only of whim. But in order to limit itself, it must listen to external advice, the category to which the Bible assigns *knowledge of the truth* and *the expression of love*. The first relates to rational determination and the second to positive human feelings. Both of these spheres powerfully interact with the human will because mind, feelings, and will are the basic qualities of personality. In spite of the independence of these three spheres of self-expression of the human personality, there is always the possibility of their harmonious interaction. When love and truth act together on human will, the latter is much less inclined to resistance.

What can be said about the ability of the will to listen to the voice of truth? We are well acquainted with the change of will that occurred in the case of Naaman. At first he was angry with the prophet Elisha because the latter did not pay him adequate attention and recommended a rather strange method of healing. Then, however, on the way home, his servant said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not

have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed!’” (2Ki 5:13). Good sense won the day over wounded feelings. Naaman listened to wise advice. He did not only decide to act as he had been told, but he also freely refused to worship the pagan gods to which he paid homage earlier. Pride is the basic defect of free will, but recognizing its limitations under the influence of knowledge, it is capable of overcoming itself.

Where the knowledge of truth does not help, love can influence the self-limitation of the will. This is attested numerous times in the Bible. The humble words and behavior of Nabal’s wife instantly changed David’s rage to mercy (1Sa 25:14-35). The same thing happened with the fury of the Ephraimites, which was calmed by Gideon’s humble answer: “What have I accomplished compared to you?” (Judg 8:3). For this reason, it is very important to apply love when pointing out the sins of others. The capacity for humility can make correction painless. Even proud Saul could not withstand the meek words of David: “Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea?” (1Sa 24:15). The best correction is done without degrading or lording it over the guilty party. If we tell a brother about his error, doing it carefully and not roughly, we incline his heart to ours. If we are able to humble ourselves together with him, it is guaranteed that he will not be insulted. Only in this way can we expect to comparatively easily and painlessly “win over our brother,” which means to direct his will in the necessary direction.

Why does free will operate so contrarily? Because it will not accept any violence done to it. As Immanuel Kant said, it is autonomous or self-directing. This does

not mean that it is not capable of listening to another opinion. It does not mean that it ignores everything and everyone around it. It does mean that the will usually opposes all violence, including opinions forced upon it by means of rough demands, insults, pretexts, or threats. Such impositions can even appear in the guise of emotionally charged language (for example, an arrogant or carping tone of voice).

It is a mistake to think that free will opposes all rational conclusions. On the contrary, it hears them, but makes its own decision. Why its own? Because in addition to the mind, the conscience and intuition also influence choice—capacities that belong to our immortal soul. The mind may demand of the will self-preservation or the avoidance of danger at any price, while the conscience calls for self-sacrifice. And the will may choose the latter. In such cases we say that the conscience is the interior motor of ethical choice.

Besides listening to the voice of truth and love, free will has the capacity to root itself in its initial choice. In this case its capacity to examine existing views, convictions, and decisions decreases with every choice that confirms the first one. Such self limitation of free will is a capacity of its voluntary enslavement, not for the sake of just anyone, but only for a beloved person or a righteous idea. This is the only slavery and the only risk in the world that free will does not oppose. More than that, it even strives to find a situation worthy of its own importance. Finding it, the will is at peace, because finally it is able to throw off the burden of unjustified worries and be rid of the pernicious feeling of loneliness.

If these two stimulators of the will are compared, then first place in the matter of

humbling free will must go to love. Zacchaeus heard the righteous assertions of the rational mind spoken against him every day, but there was no hint in them of the love that could turn him to the truth. The love of the Lord did what His righteousness could not. How wonderful it is that truth and love meet in one place—the heart of the Most High God! Love is the best regulator of the arbitrariness of human will, even when the changes made through its agency are insufficient to cross over to the side of good.

It is important to note that the more love there is, the more strongly it influences the will. This may be observed, for example, in the lives of loving spouses. Over the years their love is strengthened, because their self-giving is strengthened. This principle is applicable to spiritual questions. Up to the moment that he turns to God, an unbeliever knows only a part of God's love for him although that is sufficient to capture his will at first. Correspondingly, his free will is capable of refusing its rights only in part, because it is reacting to a limited knowledge of the love of God. When the object of an effort of will on the part of a Christian becomes the love of God in its more perfect form, free will can refuse its rights to a greater extent than it could before.

Naturally, in eternity when we will know God's love in perfection, we will reject completely the negative part of our freedom. There our freedom will find its true destiny and cease once and for all dithering from side to side looking for the best deal. Better love simply will be found nowhere. There the dream of all the representatives of Christian mysticism seeking perfect union with the Lord will be fulfilled.

### Hardworking freedom

The animal that usually personifies the unwillingness to change one's will is the donkey. The stubbornness of this animal is noted even in the Bible. However, few are aware that the donkey is quite a hard-working animal and its self-will can be explained in a different way. A donkey is stubborn only when it has been overworked. If it has rest and something to eat, it will keep putting out effort. Something similar happens with human free will: when it is forced, especially without mercy, it stops and goes on strike. When it is given work in accordance with its strength as well as adequate space to exist, it patiently carries the burden of its obligations.

Knowing this quality of human will, psychologists advise against forcing other people to accept one's opinion, because this unavoidably elicits a negative reaction in a free being. Like a donkey, a human being will resist force with all his strength, even when it is offered for his good. He must be convinced of the good independently. Not only that, but the more he is forbidden, the more he will want to do the forbidden thing. Application of the means of convincing—explanation, proof, and mainly love—will always incline the free will to the proposed decision. Such is the functioning mechanism of the most amazing of all the qualities of the human being.

By means of his eternal providence, God determined to include the human will in the task of spiritual perfection of human beings. This task is accomplished only through self-control, self-limitation, and self-discipline. This way is distinct both from fatalism and waywardness, both of which are types of slavery of the will.

Having this in mind, the apostle Paul exclaims, "Everything is permissible for me—but I will not be mastered by anything" (1Co 6:12). These words represent the position that avoids both extremes: Paul refuses everything that desires to "master" his free will by force, but recognizes the interior human demand for divine "bene-

fit." In this way, he calls us to work on ourselves, voluntarily realizing what is according to God's plan. The Lord "hews out" from our disorderly will a masterpiece of spiritual art (Isa 51:1), but He does not do it without our desire. We show our desire and readiness to respond to His providence, and He puts it into practice.

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