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FREEDOM OF WILL AND THE IRRESISTIBLE IMPULSE

by

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There is no question in the mind of anyone who keeps abreast of legal decisions that the whole question of insanity will have to be reexamined. Since May 1st, 1954, there have been at least significant decisions regarding insanity in the District of Columbia alone.¹ There seems to be a wide difference of opinion from one jurisdiction to another. And one thing is certain—whenever the reexamination take place, a great deal of study will involve the question of the “irresistible impulse.”

Taken at face value, the expression would seem to deny freedom to the will under certain conditions. This raises a number of questions:

- (1) To what extent does the teaching on freedom of the will apply?
- (2) What is the teaching on freedom of the will?
- (3) Can the human will be coerced?
- (4) If the will cannot be *coerced*, can it be *influenced*?
- (5) Does the expression “irresistible impulse” correctly designate the state of mind of a man presented with the urge to commit some act?

This article will be divided into five sections: first, a discussion of that part of human activity in which it is affirmed that the will is free; secondly, a discussion of free will; thirdly, a discussion on how the intellect is said to move the will; fourthly, a discussion on the psychosomatic unity of man—which explains how the higher powers are influenced by the lower powers; and fifthly, an application of these teachings to the question of an “irresistible impulse.”

It is to be noted that this discussion on freedom of the will is being taken from the philosophical point of view, and with emphasis on the Thomistic solution to the question.

I. Freedom of Will and Human Activity

When it is asserted that man has free will, the observation is not to be understood as implying that man exercises freedom in *all* activities. On the contrary, we know that a large number of human activities are not the products of choice but follow a determined goal. The man who stands on a ledge twenty feet above the ground will, if he steps off the ledge, move toward the ground with the same necessity as a stone which is dropped from the same ledge. A man does not ordinarily will his acts

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¹ *Gunther v. U.S.*, *Tatum v. U.S.*, *Stewart v. U.S.*, *Durham v. U.S.*

of digestion; they take place without his deciding for their occurrence.

Free will is exercised upon those conscious motives which become present to our minds. These conscious motives may, in turn be *influenced* by unconscious factors, but the final choice is made by the will upon the basis of those conscious judgments which the intellect entertains. In other words, the will is free to act upon or to refuse to act upon those motives which the mind presents. We define "motive" as "an object which the mind presents to the will as something good and desirable."²

II. Freedom of the Will

In order to discuss freedom of the will, let us first define three terms:

- I. Good
- II. Universal Good
- III. Particular Good

I. *Good* is defined as "*that which satisfies*", that which is appropriate to a thing, that which is the object of the striving of a thing.

II. *Universal Good* is the infinite good. It is that which satisfies in every conceivable respect; that which fulfills every possible need we might have. It is the ultimate goal of human striving.

III. *Particular Goods*: Those things which satisfy but to a lesser degree than the universal good. Those goods which are less than the infinitely good.

No particular good is capable of satisfying our needs in every way (as the Universal Good can). Particular goods are not so intimately tied up with human striving that we cannot do without them. Because they cannot satisfy in every way they furnish at most only a temporary state of happiness.³

Having made these definitions, we are ready to discuss freedom of the will.

As far as the *Universal Good* is concerned, the human will is strictly determined in its nature just as much as hydrogen and oxygen are determined to produce water if the proper conditions are present. In other words, there is no freedom of the will if the will were presented by the mind with something which the mind recognized as the *Infinite* (Universal) Good. The human will would tend toward the Infinite Good with the same natural necessity as the stone falls downward if dropped from a height.

² Robert Edward Brennan, *The Image of His Maker*. Milwaukee, Bruce Publishing Company, 1948. P. 223.

³ The foundation for freedom of the human will in respect to a *particular* good lies in its natural determination toward the universal good. If the natural necessitating object of the will is the *Universal* good, then no *particular* good can naturally determine it, because no particular good can adequately replace the universal good.

The question of freedom of the will arises in connection with *Particular Goods*.

We say that a man is not necessarily determined toward *particular* goods because particular goods may be considered by the intellect under two different aspects:

- (1) According to the proportion of good which the Particular Good possesses in relation to the Universal Good.
- (2) According to the relative lack of good which the particular good possesses in comparison to the Universal Good.

Thus, any *particular* good may be considered under its aspect of desirability or under its aspect of relative undesirability in comparison to the universal good.

Ordinarily the well-integrated human person does seek after a particular good if the particular good does not interfere with his attaining the ultimate good. For example, if an honest man is in a position to earn honestly one million dollars, he will probably devise means to obtain the million dollars. But if the honest man believed that he could obtain the million only by dishonest means, then he would refuse to obtain the million dollars by dishonest means.

Moreover, freedom of the will in connection with particular goods involves two kinds of freedom:

- (1) A man may *will* or *not will* a particular good (i.e., in the case of the million dollars he is free to seek after it or to leave it alone).
- (2) If a man *does will*, he *may will* one particular good in preference to another particular good, when several particular goods are available to him.

The first freedom (1) is called *freedom of exercise*. The second freedom (2) is called *freedom of specification*.

Let us consider these a bit further in relation to particular goods. In *freedom of exercise* a man is free to seek or he is free to refuse a particular good. It is in *freedom of exercise* that we have the whole root of free will. The freedom of choice is his freedom to *act* or *not to act* when he is faced with the opportunity of acquiring a particular good.

If a man *refuses* a particular good, there is no further question. But, if a man *chooses to seek after* a particular good, there may or may not be necessity involved in his *attaining* the particular good.

To illustrate these points let us take an example: Suppose that a man is in the District of Columbia. He is presented with the idea of going to Baltimore to buy a suit of clothing. He may refuse to go to Baltimore (freedom of exercise). Then there is no further question.

But suppose our hypothetical man chooses to go to Baltimore (freedom of exercise). He has available to him several modes of trans-

portation: he may (1) walk, (2) drive an automobile, (3) take a train, (4) go by airplane (freedom of specification). He now has a choice of adopting which of these means he desires (freedom of specification). If all means are available to him, he is free to choose any of them to achieve his goal, i.e., arrival at Baltimore.

Now let us take an illustration of necessity *once a choice is made*. Suppose that the District of Columbia were separated from Baltimore by a wide river, and suppose that the only available means of transportation across the river were a raft. In this case, assuming that the man has decided to go over to Baltimore, he will have to cross the river by means of a raft since this is the only means of transportation available to him for satisfying his desire to get to Baltimore. In this case, he was initially free to decide whether he wanted to cross the river. But, once having decided to cross the river, he was necessitated to cross it by means of a raft.

Here is another point to consider: When an individual is free to specify the means by which he will attain a particular good, he need not choose the means which he believes to be the most pleasurable or the most effective. This is a matter of everyday experience.

In summary we may say that an individual is free to choose or to refuse *particular* goods. Once he has chosen a particular good, he *may* or *may not* be necessitated as to the means by which he will attain the good. His necessity in respect to the means will depend upon whether or not more than one means is available to him.

III. How the Intellect Moves the Will

Like any human appetite the will must be presented with something to strive for before the will carries out its own action. The will is described as a "blind" faculty; and it is moved only by knowledge of some sort. The knowledge is provided by the mind.

It is to be noted that when we say that the mind moves the will, we do not mean that the mind exerts a force upon the will, like a billiard cue pushing a billiard ball and putting the ball in motion.

The "motion" exerted by the mind is simply this: the mind in apprehending the desirability of an object presents the object to the will as something which the will may desire to strive after. The will is moved by the mind when the mind presents an object as being desirable. Once the will has an object the will carries out its own action.

There are all kinds of objects (*particular* goods) which could attract the human appetite for happiness. Some of these objects are material and are attractive towards material powers. Other particular goods are spiritual and attract our spiritual powers. When we are hungry we find food attractive; when we are cold we find a warm fire

attractive. These are material goods. So, too, with emotions⁴—a man may want a feeling of security, a feeling of being wanted. We may call these “emotional goods”. Or a man may seek “spiritual goods” such as mastery of a science or the acquisition of good intellectual habits. Each of these goods,—material, emotional, or spiritual—is only a particular good. No one of them by itself could satisfy all human longings and aspirations. At best it can only satisfy a particular desire, and usually for only a short time.

IV. *The Psychosomatic Unity of Man*

Man is a creature composed of body and soul. Man is not a body alone. Neither is he a soul alone. Neither is he a body plus a soul. Rather we say that man is a composite being whose essential principles are an incomplete spiritual substance (called the soul) and matter with which the soul is so intimately united that the soul confers upon the matter its existence.⁵ In other words, when we consider the human being in his state of existence upon this earth, we should think of the body and soul as one unit and not as a house haunted by a ghost.

The psychosomatic phenomena which are the subject of so much study in present-day medicine flow from this very nature of the human composite.

The intellectual soul is the ultimate principle of living activity in the human composite. In the intellectual soul itself are rooted the faculties of intellect and of will. In the human composite which is “informed” by the soul are rooted sensile and vegetal capacities.⁶ Vegetal, sensile, and intellectual powers are all rooted in the one soul.⁷

“Moreover, when one psychological activity, is intense, another is held up, which would not be the case were the principle of activity not essentially identical.”⁸

From this union of intellectual, sensile and vegetal faculties in the one soul, come certain consequences: the same soul which is the source of intellect and will is also the source of emotions. Emotions are rooted in the soul-body composite. Emotions are shared by man in common with the lower animals; though in man they have an excellence which is due to their control by intellect and will.⁹

⁴ Properly speaking, emotions and “emotional goods” should be classified in the realm of the material world, philosophically speaking, since they are involved in the conditions of matter. However, they are removed from the degree of materiality which we first instanced.

⁵ *Summa Theologica* Ia Q. 76, art. 1, ad 5 um.

⁶ *Ibid.* Ia Q. 76, art. 4, corpus.

⁷ *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* IV, 1.

⁸ *Summa Theologica* Ia, Q. 76, art. 3, corpus.

⁹ *Ibid.* Ia-IIae, Q. 74, art. 3, ad 1 um.

Moreover the soul is in each part of the body and throughout the whole organism.¹⁰ Thus, in treating the nature of man, we must always recognize that the physiological parts can exist in their own right. In spite of the one identical form of the body as a whole, the parts will function to a certain degree in their own right while their activity is coordinated for the good of the organism as a whole. Nevertheless there is a subordination among the parts for the perfection of the whole. These parts should be coordinated in their activity by the intellect which is the most excellent power.¹¹

However, the regulation which the intellect exercises over the other powers is not coercive. It is more a coordination. The emotions and drives have some autonomy of their own; and they may resist the commands of reason.¹²

In some men there may be an upsurge of the sensible elements into the higher intellectual level so that the power of intellect may be strongly influenced, if not overwhelmed upon occasion. A violent emotion can weaken, distort or even totally impede the actions of the human mind.¹³ Thus we come to a possibility: An emotion or bodily condition may be so vehement that it weakens (or distorts or impedes) the action of the intellect so that the intellect is not judging an object in the same way as it would if no other influences were at play.¹⁴ The distortion of the intellect by the emotions or by bodily conditions *indirectly* has an effect upon will choices since the intellect, when influenced by the emotions or bodily conditions, may represent only the desirability of an object and fail to consider the object's aspects of undesirability.

The perfect rule of the powers of the body by the intellect is found only in an individual who has achieved perfect integration, or what the psychologist calls "emotional maturity."¹⁵ Emotion may be one of the principles for disintegration of the harmony of a human personality.¹⁶ It is the fact that men experience sense pleasures more intensely than they experience intellectual pleasures that there can be conflicts within the human personality, and that most men experience only the lower pleasures.¹⁷ On the other hand, it is these same emotions which may be

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Ia Q. 76, art. 1, ad 5 um.

¹¹ *Ibid.* IIIa Q. 2, art. 2, corpus.

¹² *Ibid.* Ia, art. 3, ad 2 um.

¹³ *Ibid.* Ia-IIae, Q. 77, art. 2, corpus.

¹⁴ "According as a man is affected by an emotion, something seems to him fitting which does not seem so when he is not so affected. And thus, that seems good to a man when angered, which does not seem good to him when he is calm. It is in this way that the emotion may move the will *as regards the object.*" (*Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, Q. 9, art. 2, corpus).

¹⁵ Cf. note (11).

¹⁶ *Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae Q. 30, art. 1, ad 1 um.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* IIa-IIae, Q. 144, art. 4, ad 4 um.

brought under the direction of the intellect, and when so directed, may help to integrate the human personality.¹⁸

V. Irresistible Impulse

Let us now apply these views on the nature of man to the problem of the "irresistible impulse" in relation to the unconscious mind.

The word "unconscious" itself has many meanings. Miller, in his work *Unconsciousness*, shows that there are at least sixteen meanings for the term and that, even in the realm of Psychoanalysis, the term is subject to a variety of meanings.¹⁹

Vandervelt and Odenwald define "the unconscious" as follows: "a collective noun to indicate the sum of dispositions, experiences, and memories of the mind."²⁰

If we want to express this in another way, in reference to the "irresistible impulse", the "unconscious" is the collective designation for the storehouse of our past experiences, for the appetites of our vegetal and sensile powers, for the bodily habits we have acquired and for the innate bodily dispositions with which we are endowed. We have said above that these lower powers and modifications of powers have some autonomy of their own but which is surrendered to the regulation by reason in a well-integrated adult personality. If these powers are not subjected to control by reason, each of these irrational powers will seek to fulfill its own natural tendency.

The individual who allows each of his irrational drives to go as far as it wants, degenerates into a turmoil of emotions. In other words, every man has a number of drives and wants which ask for satisfaction. If he lets them go as far as they would want to, he finds himself now pushed in one direction and now pushed in another.

The man who is in complete control of his impulses, subjects them to judgment. He first judges whether the over-all good of his human personality will benefit or will be destroyed by allowing a particular drive to realize its full end. If the man judges that there will be a benefit (or at least no harm) to the personality as a whole, he will probably allow the particular drive to pursue its natural goal.

This kind of control by the intellect is not usually something which happens over night. It requires training; and any *human* individual can, by proper training, acquire the degree of control which is necessary for him to coordinate his vegetal and sensile powers under the guidance of reason. If an individual does not possess this coordination by reason,

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Ia-IIae Q. 80, art. 2, corpus.

¹⁹ James Grier Miller, *Unconsciousness* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1942. P. 43.

²⁰ James A. Vandervelt and Robert P. Odenwald, *Psychiatry and Catholicism*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1952. P. 151.

so that the control of reason is usurped by some sensile or vegetal power, there may be a number of courses. To name just three, (1) improper upbringing as a child, (2) bad environment, (3) the individual's own wilfulness. Sentimentalists have too often emphasized the first two reasons and almost deny the third. But it would seem closer to the truth to say that the third reason is the more frequent.

In determining guilt one should attempt to learn whether the individual's habitual lack of control (if it is habitual) is because he has never known otherwise or because he preferred to give in to his lower impulses. Another point to consider: *to what extent* was the intellect *weakened, influenced or impeded* in judging rightly on the desirability of his action? Again, was the individual responsible for putting himself in a situation in which his judgment was so affected that he could only see his action as desirable under the circumstances? Was this the only time in which the judgment of the individual was hampered by influence from the lower powers?

We know that even the grossly insane never *completely* lose their powers of judgment. As the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment 1949-1953 reported:

"It would be impossible to apply modern methods of care and treatment in mental hospitals, and at the same time to maintain order and discipline, if the great majority of the patients, even among the grossly insane did not know what is forbidden by the rules and that, if they break them, they are liable to forfeit some privilege."²¹

We know that the insane possess *some* power of judgment, at least in respect to some things—and consequently they possess some capacity of will. As Vandervelt and Odenwald remark:

"The aim of modern psychiatry . . . is to educate the patients to develop into responsible persons. But how can this be achieved if the patient will not cooperate? Cooperation, however, supposes a certain amount of will power. Hence, psychiatrists themselves admit in practice that the mentally ill are not completely devoid of will power."²²

Summary

It is incorrect to speak of a man's will as driven by an "irresistible impulse". It is more correct to speak of a man as motivated by some urge or idea which is so dominant in his field of consciousness that the less desirable aspects of the urge or idea are left ignored. In other words the will is not being forced to act against itself. Rather the will moves towards the object because the object has been presented by reason as something desirable.

²¹ Quoted by the Court in *Durham v. the United States*. Slip copy. P. 21.

²² Vandervelt and Odenwald, *Op. Cit.*, P. 33.