

## II. HUMAN LIFE

### *Theme 6: The dynamics of the will*

#### **a) The experience of the will in man**

- Man, as we have seen, is a being who is open to the truth, but also, man is open to the good (good things); he tends towards good things in a natural way
  - We have already seen how the desires and impulses in the person are tendencies towards the good things perceived by our senses
  - Now we will discuss the human tendency towards the good thing that is grasped or understood by the intellect
- In this context, the human will can be defined as: a spiritual tendency towards the good thing perceived by the intellect
  - In classical philosophy, this inclination towards the intellectual good (the good thing understood by the intellect) was called the rational appetite, to distinguish it from the sensitive appetites that are the sources of our impulses and desires
- In daily life and experience it can be difficult to distinguish between the sensitive tendencies (desire, impulse) and the tendencies of an intellectual or rational nature (wanting, loving)

“The confusion comes from the fact that in general, to want and to desire something occurs at the same time because it is the same object that is wanted and desired at that moment. The fact that we want the thing is undoubtedly awoken by the abstract representation of the good thing (in the intellect) but when we want that thing we do not want it as an abstract good as it appears in our intellect. Rather, as is the case with every appetite, we direct ourselves towards the real, specific, good thing in itself which is represented (in the intellect) in an abstract way” (R. Vernaux, *Filosofía del hombre*, pp. 151-152).

- So, the same good thing is wanted by the will and desired by the concupiscible appetite at the same time
- If we see a new type of mobile phone or car, we can experience the desire to have that car or phone (concupiscible appetite) and we can want it also with our will

⇒ In this case, the desiring and the wanting are united in the object (the phone or the car)

- It is easier to grasp the difference between these two tendencies when the good thing that we perceive intellectually is not a sensitive good (that can be perceived by the senses) but a good that is wanted by the will without the desire of the concupiscible appetite

➤ This would be the case when we want justice to be done without desiring any sensitive good

⇒ For example, if we want to do well in our exams, without cheating, and without expecting any sensitive reward

- The difference between the tendency of desire and that of the will is even more clearly shown when there is opposition between the will and the desire of the concupiscible appetite

➤ Through desire we tend towards sensitive goods either really perceived or imagined, while the will tends towards a good thing that is grasped by the intellect

⇒ For example, I can want with my will to have good health, and because of that I may deprive myself of sensible goods that are desirable to the palate (tongue), such as a beef steak full of cholesterol in the case of a person who has a bad heart

- In order to show how there is a rational inclination in man (will) we shall use a negative example. What do we mean by the involuntary act? Spontaneously we understand that a person's act is involuntary:

➤ When it is done through ignorance; in this case we say that the person did it "without wanting to do it", because he did not know the specific circumstances in which the act was carried out

⇒ The person acted without previous knowledge or awareness (lack of prior awareness)

➤ We also say that an act is involuntary when an external agent pushes a person to carry out a specific action against his will

⇒ In this case, we see that the person did not want to do that act

➤ We also say that an action was involuntary when it was done out of fear; fear is really a mixture of a voluntary and an involuntary act, depending on the greater or lesser objectivity of this fear

- So we can say that a voluntary act is one
  - that has its origin in the individual person; in the will
  - who knows the specific circumstances of the act (cf. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1111a 22-23).
  - So, for an act to be totally voluntary, it must come from inside the person (his will); it cannot have been forced on him by an external agent
  - And he needs to have certain knowledge of the goal towards which that free act will lead him
- Regarding this knowledge of the end, it may be:
  - Imperfect: when we know the thing that is our end that we want to achieve, but we do not know it as our end or goal.
    - ⇒ For example, an animal will direct itself towards some good perceived by the senses; but this inclination is automatic (a stimulus-response reaction) without any reflection behind it because he is aiming at getting a known good, but not as his goal
    - ⇒ If he were to understand that good thing as a goal, he would be able to choose the means to obtain that goal
  - Perfect: when we know the good thing that is our goal, and we know it as our goal. Man can know that a good thing is his goal, and so, he can distinguish it from the means to achieve that goal
    - ⇒ Because of this, we say that to propose goals to oneself is typically human;
    - ⇒ As a result, the actions he chooses in order to attain his goal are really his in a very personal way;
    - ⇒ An act with perfect knowledge carried out by man is where man has given himself his own goals;
    - ⇒ As the knowledge is perfect, the act will also be fully voluntary

#### **b) Nature and object of the will**

- As we have seen, the fact that we discover within ourselves an inclination or tendency towards the good things we have known through the intellect, is a

sign that we must have some faculty that is capable of having that inclination; this faculty is the will

- The operation or act proper to the will is that of wanting or loving; the object of the will is the good thing that has been known previously by the intellect

⇒ So in order to love or to want something, we need to have known it beforehand

- Just as the object of the intellect is any being in as much as it is true (and can be known), the object of the will is any being in as much as it is good or loveable

⇒ As a result, we can say that things are not good because they are wanted by someone, rather they are wanted because they are good

⇒ Everything that exists has some amount of goodness in it; because of that, it can be known by the intellect, the intellect can know the goodness of the thing

⇒ So the will moves towards the good things that have been previously grasped, known, understood by the intellect; the will moves towards this good thing precisely because it is good and attracts us

⇒ We can see that the good thing understood by the intellect is not necessarily a sensible good (we can want to be loyal, generous, etc without feeling like it);

⇒ the will can tend towards sensitive goods too but not because they are perceivable by the senses (the will doesn't "grasp" sensation), but rather because they are understood by the intellect to be good things in themselves

- As human knowledge is imperfect, it is possible that the intellect understands as good something that is not a real, good thing

⇒ In fact, for the will to tend towards an object, it is not necessary for this thing to be good in reality; all that is required is that the intellect perceive it as good

⇒ Thus we can say that the end of the will is any good thing, be it real or apparent

⇒ This means that the human will is necessarily inclined towards good things; hence, the will cannot choose something bad in itself

- ⇒ If the will does tend towards something that is bad, it does so not because the thing is bad, but rather, because it is understood to be good, or to be a means for attaining a higher good
- ⇒ For example, a man could freely prefer martyrdom, even though he knows that death is the worst evil, because he hopes to receive a greater good in the next life
- ⇒ In the case of happiness: all men are necessarily inclined towards happiness (the greatest good); but the will is not inclined towards a specific good thing but rather it tends towards a specific thing because it is perceived as good
- The will is an operative faculty (a capacity to act) of a spiritual nature which follows on from the act of understanding
  - ⇒ We have seen that the human intellect does not depend intrinsically on the body, and because of this it is known as a spiritual faculty; the will exists at the same level of being, not being intrinsically attached to the body
- Spirituality of the will:
  - ⇒ Unlike material things, the will is capable of reflecting on its own act of wanting or loving; in particular, the will is considered to be reflexive because it wants or loves its own act of wanting
    - o As every good thing is a possible object of the will, this means that the will can want everything, including its own acting of wanting
  - ⇒ Like the intellect, the will does not depend on limits of space and time; the proper act of the will which is to want or to love, takes place in a particular space and time, but it is not bound by these coordinates
    - o Because of this people in love can say: I love you without restrictions such as time (I love you on the eve days of the week) nor space (I love you here but not at home)
    - o The will is also capable of developing habits through which it can grow in an unlimited way: it can always love more things and love them better
  - ⇒ The will also has certain independence regarding matter that is shown in the fact that it is capable of being moved by abstract values such as honour, justice, fame, etc.

- o Such values are not sensitive and yet they can awaken the will and move it to act; however, the thing that is wanted is always some specific good thing; moved by the desire for fame, I may want that particular job or position
- However, we all have the experience that no created good is capable of fully satisfying man's desire for happiness; man's will, capacity to want and to love, is always open to more good things
  - ⇒ The will always wants more because it always reaches up towards a higher good thing
  - ⇒ This is one of the anthropological arguments that helps us to see that the structure (makeup) of man, by his very nature, seeks or requires the fullness of goodness, truth and happiness, which cannot be achieved in this life, but only in the afterlife
  - ⇒ Man's insatiable desire for happiness that is never satisfied on earth points us towards the fact that the person has a transcendent goal beyond this world
- Aristotle affirms that the voluntary action has two intrinsic principles:
  - ⇒ The general inclination towards good things; the desire for happiness
  - ⇒ The choice of specific good things in order to achieve happiness; this requires deliberate reflection through which we prefer one good thing over another
  - ⇒ So while we really desire, want, to be happy, we cannot and do not choose to be happy; we can only choose how to go about attaining this happiness, but, for example, we cannot decide not to want to be happy
- Another way of explaining the same thing is that of Thomas Aquinas: he states that all men necessarily tend towards happiness
  - ⇒ This natural tendency towards the good in general is a necessary inclination that is present in all our action and is known as "the will according to nature" (*voluntas ut natura*)
  - ⇒ As the human intellect is limited, we cannot know the final end and the supreme good directly; so the will always directs itself towards specific good things which are means to attaining the final goal of perfect happiness; this tendency is known as "the will according to reason" (*voluntas ut ratio*)

- The human will is one and its acts of wanting or loving are one; but with this act we can distinguish the material level (wanting a specific good thing) and the formal level (the good enclosed on the thing that is wanted)
  - ⇒ When we speak of the good in general, we are referring to this formal level; this formal goodness becomes real in specific good things
  - ⇒ However, as none of these good things fully satisfies the formal longing for perfect good and happiness, the will is undetermined regarding specific finite goods
  - ⇒ Because of this indetermination, we can say that the human act is not totally predetermined; we are only predetermined towards the good in general, but not towards partial goods;
  - ⇒ Because of this the practical intellect must intervene and present specific good things to us that can direct our free desire for or wanting of a specific good

### **c) Intellect and will**

- Apparent dilemma in human conduct:
  - ⇒ On the one hand, the will moves towards the good thing presented by the intellect; this grasping of the good thing moves the will to act; so it would seem that the will is moved by the intellect
  - ⇒ On the other hand, it is said that the will can choose to want something or not to do so; so the will itself would seem to be the cause of its own activity; so the will can move itself and the other knowing potencies, be they sensitive (senses) or intellectual
    - o I can not want to see and so I don't see
  - ⇒ So which faculty moves the other? Does the will move the intellect or is it the other way around?
  - ⇒ We have to conclude that the intellect and the will are two potencies that are co-present in man and interact with each other
  - ⇒ It is always the whole person who acts through these faculties; the whole man knows and wants
  - ⇒ Intellect and will are two real causes, each at its own level, because an action can be caused in two ways

- ⇒ As a goal: the intellect moves the will like an end, presenting it with a good that ought to be loved; in this sense the intellect is the final cause of the will (what moves it to act so as to reach its goal)
- ⇒ As an agent: the will moves the intellect like an agent, making the intellect consider its object; in this way the will acts as the agent cause of the intellect and other potencies
- ⇒ There is a feedback process whereby the intellect moves the will by presenting it with something good; then the will moves the intellect to get to know that thing better; so the will can move the intellect, although the will is not blind, and so will always be moved by a good that has been presented to it by reason and for a reason
  - o The acts of knowing the truth and of loving the good, are really different to each other but they take place at the same time

#### **d) Harmonising intellect, will and passions**

- All three, intellect, will and feelings are sources of human activity.
- For there to be harmony between the three, the feelings need to be reflected on and guided by the intellect and the will
- The intellect has the function of analyzing our feelings to identify whether or not they are right or wrong, good or bad according to the circumstances
- After this evaluation, the person can decide to accept a good feeling or to reject a bad feeling; this is done using the will
- The bad feeling may not disappear immediately but it can be rejected repeatedly by the intellect and the will and they can try to foster good feelings
- In the case where the feeling is judged to be good, it can be accepted and wanted by the will and further fostered by the intellect and will working together
- The ideal or most perfect state in which a person can find themselves is when intellect, will and feelings are united in knowing and wanting a true good thing and experiencing positive feelings regarding that good thing
- However, at times we will have to be ready to know and want the true good without always having pleasant feelings regarding it



- For further ideas: see <http://www.cormacburke.or.ke/node/113>. The text may also be found on the e-learning platform