

## THE INSEPARABILITY OF FREEDOM, GOODNESS, AND FINAL END IN SAINT THOMAS

Peter A. Kwasniewski

True liberation of man, that which is brought to him by Christ, is also liberation from the semblance of liberation, from the appearance of liberty which is not true liberty. *Ipse liberabit te.*

—John Paul II

A proper grasp of the concept of liberty or freedom (*libertas*), treated often by St. Thomas Aquinas, is of utmost importance in any discussion of the psychological powers proper to man, entailing, as is obvious, widespread consequences in the sphere of politics and jurisprudence. Although much has been written on this theme, few have considered the teaching of St. Thomas in light of the exposition of Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Libertas Praestantissimum* (1888), which has as one of its chief tasks the defining of human liberty. It is our purpose in this article to clarify Thomas's teaching on the nature and perfection of liberty by placing it in the context furnished by Pope Leo, using in addition Yves Simon's essay "Liberty and Authority," which contains a valuable discussion of the twofold indifference of the will.<sup>1</sup>

---

Peter Kwasniewski, a graduate (as P. Kay) of Thomas Aquinas College, directs a Gregorian *schola cantorum* in Silver Springs, Maryland, and is currently a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the Catholic University of America, writing on the ethics of Saint Thomas.

<sup>1</sup> In *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 16 (1940), 86–114. Pope Leo's *Libertas Praestantissimum*, along with his other social and political encyclicals, may be found in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. Claudia Carlen, I.H.M. (Raleigh, North Carolina: McGrath Publishing, 1981); *The Church Speaks to the Modern World: The Social Teachings of Leo*

Peter A. Kwasniewski

At first glance, liberty seems to be nothing else than man's ability to choose some apprehended good other than the final good, for the sake of attaining happiness (*beatitudo*). 'Free will' or 'free choice' refer, then, to his capacity of willing a true or apparent good without any other necessity than his general orientation to the final or total good he seeks by nature.<sup>2</sup> *Libertas*, therefore, most properly describes a potency of a being endowed with freedom to choose.<sup>3</sup> One might define it as the ability of a rational or intellectual substance to determine itself through action.<sup>4</sup> Taken in this sense, freedom is often used to describe the condition or state of a being that *has* free choice. The connection of these two becomes evident when we consider the close kinship of the terms *libertas* and *liberum arbitrium*, "freedom" and "free choice."

We shall accept as our starting point that the notion of choice is unintelligible apart from the fixed or unchoosable willing of a final and universal end, to which the willing of

XIII, ed. Etienne Gilson (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1954); *Social Wellsprings: Fourteen Epochal Documents by Pope Leo XIII*, ed. Joseph Husslein (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1949).

<sup>2</sup> See *Summa theologiae* (ST) Ia, qu. 83, art. 3, corp.: "the proper [act] of free-will is choice, for we say that we have a free will because we can take one thing while refusing another"; ibid., ad 2: "choice itself is a judgment from which free-will takes its name." In the body of qu. 83, art. 2, Thomas observes that *liberum arbitrium*, in the way we have used it, commonly means a capacity or principle, although properly it refers to an act: "Although free-will, according to the proper signification of the word [arbitrium], names a certain act, in the common manner of speaking, we call that free-will which is the principle of the act by which man judges freely."

<sup>3</sup> In this article, the words "freedom" and "liberty" will be used interchangeably, as each is an acceptable translation of *libertas*.

<sup>4</sup> *Quæstiones Disputatae De Veritate* (*De ver.*) qu. 24, art. 1, corp.: "But man, judging about what is to be done by the power of reason, can also judge about his own decision [arbitrio], inasmuch as he knows the meaning of an end and of that which is for the end, and the standing and order of the one to the other; thus he is his own cause not only in moving but also in judging; and he is therefore endowed with free-will—that is to say, with a free judgment about acting or not acting."

all particular ends is ultimately ordered. Because man must desire this final good, his choices are already fundamentally determinate with respect to their ultimate goal, even though the choosing of things *quae sunt ad finem* is undetermined, being within the power of the rational agent. For this reason, freedom has nothing to say about happiness: man does not choose it as though it were possible for him *not* to want it. Rather, he chooses the goods that he knows or believes will lead him thither. "The will necessarily desires the last end in such a way that it is unable not to desire it, but it does not necessarily desire any of the means. In their regard, then, it is within the power of the will to desire this or that."<sup>5</sup> As an intellectual appetite, the will can only desire what is perceived as *perfective* of the subject in some way, since that towards which a power is naturally inclined is perfective of the subject in which that power operates. An appetite is fulfilled in desiring and attaining its proper object; anything that is 'by nature' is good, because nature is the principle and measure of completeness. As a result, human choice is innately ordered to the apprehended good, without, however, losing its freedom.<sup>6</sup> For although man freely wills this or that part

<sup>5</sup> *De ver. qu. 22, art. 6, corp.*

<sup>6</sup> See the *Commentary on Aristotle's De Interpretatione*, Bk. I, lect. 14, nn. 23–24: "There is a good that is desirable for its own sake, such as happiness, which has the nature of an ultimate end. The will necessarily adheres to a good of this kind, for all men seek to be happy by a certain kind of natural necessity. . . . If, then, there were some good things without the existence of which one could not be happy, these would be desirable of necessity, and especially by the person who perceives such an order. Perhaps to be, to live, and to think, and other similar things, if there are any, are of this kind. However, particular good things with which human acts are concerned are not of this kind nor are they apprehended as being such that without them happiness is impossible, for instance, to eat this food or that, or abstain from it. Such things, nevertheless, do have in them that whereby they move the appetite according to some good considered in them. The will, therefore, is not induced to choose these of necessity. And on this account the Philosopher expressly designates the root of the contingency of things effected by us on the part

ticular good, he must will anything he wills under the aspect of good, "that which completes me," even if he is fully aware of its defects.<sup>7</sup>

A moment's reflection discloses the cause of this built-in necessity. Each animate being wants its own good, the good of its kind and state. Hence, as soon as its knows (or thinks it knows) what is good for it, it desires to embrace that good. If this were not so, we should have to say that a living thing does not desire its own perfection, that it can desire good things and bad things to happen to it indifferently, which is patently absurd. If a being seeks what is good for it by its nature, then freedom only adds to this desire a measure of self-determination, inasmuch as the being can turn itself towards this or that good, lower or higher, seeking a fulfillment colored by the dispositions and apprehensions of the soul. The fulfillment it ultimately intends is the necessary presupposition to any intelligent action. Without a *reason* for acting, desire itself would be in vain and freedom would be indistinguishable from whimsy or chance. Freedom and a necessary desire for the good are not mutually incompatible, precisely because rational beings have freedom *in order that* they may secure their own good, which may be defined as their best state or activity. Freedom is therefore unintelligible apart from that for the sake of which free beings use it, viz., the good as apprehended by reason.

Because reason can have different apprehensions of good,

---

of deliberation—which is concerned with those things that are for the end and yet are not determined." Also relevant is *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG) Bk. III, ch. 73: "The fact that the will is a contingent cause arises from its perfection, for it does not have power limited to one outcome but rather has the ability to produce this effect or that; for which reason it is contingent towards either."

<sup>7</sup> *De Ver. qu. 22, art. 6, ad 5*: "The will naturally wills good but not this or that particular good. It is like sight, which naturally sees color but not this or that particular color. For this reason whatever the will wills it wills under the aspect of good; yet it does not have to will this or that particular good."

the will can tend towards different things in the right or the wrong order, putting lower goods above higher ones. Although a subjective valuation of goods does not necessarily match up to their objective hierarchy, the *ratio* under which any choice is made must be 'that which completes or fulfills me as a whole.'

From the start, therefore, man's freedom is intrinsically linked to the good, both as to the last end, which he must either consciously or habitually will, and as to every particular means he chooses, in which he must discern some goodness. Freedom cannot, in fact, be understood apart from the presence of goodness. Indeed, the good as perfective is the *ratio* under which man directs or determines himself to any particular end. If the choice of a good thing is to be evaluated in light of the final end which it should serve to bring nearer (since the most basic consideration is always in regard to the final end, not to a subsidiary one), then it follows that the better object is the one more perfective of the whole man. The object that is better for man's nature is also the more choiceworthy, because it leads him closer to his fulfillment. When we bear in mind that freedom is oriented to the final end, such that man only chooses freely *because* he wants happiness 'in the end' (as the phrase goes), then it also becomes clear that freedom perfects *itself* in the choice of good things. In short, the more a man chooses the good, the more his freedom is perfected by the goods he chooses.

To make manifest the truth of this important corollary—viz., that man is most free, most perfect as a rational creature, when he chooses what is *best* for him, and will be more free to the extent that he has chosen what completes his nature—is the goal of this essay. As we shall see, genuine freedom or free choice becomes stronger as man's will becomes more uprightly determined, and conversely, as man's will turns increasingly towards things harmful to his genuine perfection, free choice becomes continually less operable and freedom yields to slavery. By tracing such considerations to their point

of origin in human nature itself, we hope to place in a larger context the ethical importance of distinguishing between true and apparent goods, the former contributing to man's completion and attainment of happiness, the latter damaging or hindering it.

At this preliminary stage, the doctrine of Pope Leo is especially apposite. Having proved the necessity of a rational nature's possessing the powers of judgment and choice,<sup>8</sup> he then gives the elements of a definition of liberty that accounts for man's natural inclination to the perceived good and the possibility of his perfection as a morally mature agent who freely chooses the best for himself, as well as the possibility of radical defectiveness resulting from the choice of illusory goods.

Liberty . . . belongs only to those who have the gift of reason or intelligence. Considered as to its nature, it is the faculty of choosing means fitted for the end proposed, for he is master of his actions who can choose one thing out of many. Now, since everything chosen as a means is viewed as good or useful, and since good, as such, is the proper object of our desire, it follows that freedom of choice is a property of the will, or, rather, is identical with the will insofar as it has in its action the faculty of choice. But the will cannot proceed to act until it is enlightened by the knowledge possessed by the intellect. In other words, the good wished by the will is necessarily good insofar as it is known by the

---

<sup>8</sup> See *ST* Ia, qu. 83, art. 1, corp.: "But man acts from judgment, because by his apprehensive power he judges that something should be avoided or sought. But because this judgment, in the case of some particular act, is not from a natural instinct, but from some act of comparison in the reason, therefore he acts from free judgment and retains the power of being inclined to various things. For reason in contingent matters may follow opposite courses, as we see in dialectical syllogisms and rhetorical persuasions. Now particular operations are contingent, and therefore in such matters the judgment of reason may follow opposite courses, and is not determined to one. And forasmuch as man is rational is it necessary that man have a free-will."

intellect; and this the more, because in all voluntary acts choice is subsequent to a judgment upon the truth of the good presented, declaring to which good preference should be given.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding the possibility of moral perfection or imperfection—i.e., the right use or the abuse of freedom—the Pope goes on to say:

No sensible man can doubt that judgment is an act of reason, not of the will. The end, or object, both of the rational will and of its liberty is that good only which is in conformity with reason. Since, however, both these faculties are imperfect, it is possible, as is often seen, that the reason should propose something which is not really good, but which has the appearance of good, and that the will should choose accordingly. For, as the possibility of error, and actual error, are defects of the mind and attest its imperfection, so the pursuit of what has a false appearance of good, though a proof of our freedom—just as a disease is proof of our vitality—implies defect in human liberty. The will, also, simply because of its dependence on the reason, no sooner desires anything contrary thereto than it abuses its freedom of choice and corrupts its very essence.

Guided by these truths and keeping in view the weakness and defectibility of free will, the Pope distinguishes between two aspects of liberty: *natural* liberty, i.e., the faculty nascent, undeveloped, unformed, a mere potency towards any good, and *moral* liberty, i.e., the faculty mature, well-formed, habituated to honorable goods, a power freely ‘determined’ to choose what is right.<sup>10</sup> Man is born with natural liberty. By a suc-

<sup>9</sup> *Libertas* §5.

<sup>10</sup> *Libertas* §3. Compare *ST* Ia, qu. 83, art. 2, ad 3: “Man is said to have lost freedom by falling into sin, not as to natural liberty, which is freedom from coercion, but as regards freedom from fault and unhappiness,” viz., the freedom which results from justice in the soul, otherwise called moral liberty.

cession of good actions, he must develop this natural liberty, which is only a potency, into the power of moral liberty.<sup>11</sup>

If we were to call liberty ‘a univocal determination to the good,’ a secure tendency towards what is or appears to be best for the free agent, this description might seem better applied to an automaton or a victim of coercion instead of a man, who is characterized by his ‘autonomy,’ his openness to many possibilities. We need to look more closely at the *content* of liberty—what makes it to be what it is—before this objection can be answered. If we take as a definition of natural liberty the ability to choose from a number of particular goods according to the judgment of one’s intellect, then it is evident that such liberty has its place only in deliberate actions and that it is a power to choose what is good, whether truly or apparently so, according to a judgment of the reason. As St. Thomas explains, “the root of liberty is the will as the subject; but it is the reason as cause. For the will can tend freely towards various objects, precisely because reason can have various conceptions of good.”<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, he argues:

So far as matters of action are concerned, whatever things possess judgment that is not determined to one thing by nature are of necessity endowed with freedom of choice [*liberum arbitrium*]. And such are all intellectual beings. . . . Hence it is possible for the will to be inclined toward anything whatever that is offered to it under the aspect of good, there being no natural determination to the contrary to prevent it. Therefore, all intellectual beings have a free will, resulting from the judgment of the intellect; and this is to

<sup>11</sup> On this contrast of *potentialitas* with *potestas* more will be said below, when we come to discuss the “twofold indifference of the will.”

<sup>12</sup> *ST* Ia-IIae, qu. 17, art. 1, ad 2. Compare *SCG* Bk. II, ch. 48: “Only things that move themselves [i.e., consciously cause their own actions] have freedom in acting, and these alone act by judgment. . . . Intellectual beings enjoy freedom not only of action, but also of judgment; and this is to have free choice.”

have freedom of choice, which is defined as 'the free judgment of reason.'<sup>13</sup>

As this text brings out, the key elements in the reality of freedom are *choice* and *goodness*. Some modern theorists who have trouble distinguishing distinct elements of experience—many psychologists and biologists for example—tend to identify the phenomena characteristic of freedom either with the chance interaction of diverse chemicals, or with the hidden presence of complete necessity, or simply with the indifference of not doing anything in particular. None of these hits the mark, because each falls short of our most vivid experiences—which Simon calls “unquestionable data of spontaneous consciousness”<sup>14</sup>—of exercising freedom over our actions. In *De Veritate* qu. 24, St. Thomas explains why the cause of the happening of properly human actions must be free choice.<sup>15</sup> It is impossible that human actions be caused (a) immediately by God, “because the things which are immediately from God cannot be anything but good, and human actions are sometimes good, sometimes bad”; (b) by necessity, “because there proceed from necessity things which are always the same, but we do not see this verified in human actions; (c) by the stars; (d) by nature, “as is shown by the variety of human actions, for nature is determined to one course of action and cannot fail in it except in a minority of cases”; and finally, (e) by fortune or chance, because they are “the cause of things that happen rarely and without being intended.” St. Thomas concludes: “Nothing is left, then, but that the man who is doing the acting is himself the principle of his own acts, and consequently has free choice.”

As is evident in the way we speak and how we lead our lives, people whose minds are not coated with the dust of academic sophistry can easily distinguish the interior reality

<sup>13</sup> SCG Bk. II, ch. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Simon, 89.

<sup>15</sup> See art. I, sed contra 7.

of freedom from more external phenomena such as coercion, accident, and passivity. What, then, is this interior reality prephilosophically known to all, and given the name of ‘freedom’? This we must explore if we are to make a defense of the corollary mentioned above.

Earlier we spoke of a notion of freedom that would define it simply as the power or the act of choosing from among choosable things. In this sense, any man is free, whether saint or sinner, whenever he apprehends a certain object as desirable and *wills* to have it (after which he may go about obtaining it). However, we also said that freedom in its highest reality is intimately connected with the choice of what is perfective for the whole man. This notion of freedom, although more true in itself, is at first harder to grasp, because our intellect is often in the dark about what is genuinely good for us, and our will is rarely unswayed by passions or interests of one kind or another. Having little experience of the mature liberty exemplified by the saints, the notion we form of it is bound to be somewhat obscure. Nevertheless, it is crucial to see the connection of freedom to goodness and thus to the agent’s perfection; and inversely, to see how a perfected man is more capable of exercising his freedom in accordance with its intrinsic nature.

The point may be proved in this manner. To be free is to be able to choose; but choice ranges over the means to a series of ends culminating in happiness; freedom, therefore, is bound up with the pursuit of happiness. Man’s happiness consists in living according to his nature, for which the measure is right reason. As a result, freedom fully attains the end for which it exists, namely the highest activity of man’s nature, when (and only when) a man chooses what is *perfective* of his nature, i.e., what is according to right reason. What accords with reason is, by definition, man’s good. Any other use of freedom is actually corruptive, and inhibits the attainment of the final end, however much it may purchase temporary gratification. In sum, freedom may be considered either on the part of its

'raw power,' in isolation from the rest of man's life, in which case it seems to be nothing other than the ability to make a choice of any kind; or on the part of its integration into the whole nature of man, in which case the actual choice of a good that will bring man closer to the total good of his nature *is* the best exercise of freedom. Recalling Leo's distinction, the first sense of freedom is essentially *natural*, where 'natural' is taken to mean the naked essence of the power prescinding from its holistic purpose; the second sense of freedom is *moral*, because the power is being regarded in its relation both to reason and to the total or final good of the rational creature.

Whenever we are defining something, we must look to what is *best* for it, its perfection: as Aristotle says, "the end in anything [is] whatever is best or gives its purpose to the rest . . . it is what is best or final that should be stated" in a definition.<sup>16</sup> That is why we have two definitions of liberty—one on the side of power in itself, the other on the side of its proper use or fulfillment, its *best* condition. If a state of true freedom, i.e., perfect self-command and fulfillment of desire, is the result of choosing what is objectively *best*, then freedom should be *defined* as a perfection of the will when it has consistently chosen what is good for the whole man.

Despite the proclivities of fallen nature, there is a common experience of freedom which is closer to the second sense than to the first. Even hardened sinners can recognize the difference between a man who is at the mercy of his desires (be they concupiscent or irascible), and a man who has conquered them for the sake of victory in war, constancy in friendship, fidelity to religion, or a similar motive. Impressions of this latter condition will vary: some may consider self-mastery a form of heroism, others may view it as bondage to idealism, but *all* recognize it. The moral use of freedom is apparent whenever someone overcomes powerful inclinations to do something, and chooses instead to refrain, or even to do the

<sup>16</sup> *Topics* 146b10–13.

opposite deed. Freedom is "inescapably experienced when we feel that we are dominating over or mastering a situation."<sup>17</sup> Far from describing the state of a man who drifts along or goes with his impulse, freedom most forcefully applies to the power by which man can conquer what is rebellious in him. Simon gives the example of a man of loose habits, an alcoholic or lecher, for instance, after his moral conversion: he must firmly *will* to "overcome passionate drives and impose on them the rule of morality." If he succeeds,

he feels and realizes his freedom more decidedly than at any other time. Yet, such a free decision is not the expression of the whole person: passional drives, deeply rooted habits, are indeed voluminous parts of the personal organism. Freedom means mastery rather than totality.<sup>18</sup>

Simon's example is helpful, not because we are meant to identify freedom with a state of struggle (as when Kant declares that the moral man is in perpetual conflict with his nature), but because liberty *displays* itself as a rational power most obviously when we will to do good despite contrary inclinations. The more perfect a man's habit of choosing the good becomes, the more freely he chooses what is in accordance with his nature, likewise rejecting more freely whatever opposes it. After the example quoted, Simon focuses on the case where no struggle of opposites divides the will, not from a *lack* of desire (the passive indifference mentioned before), but from a superabundance of desire for the true good, which obviates the interior conflict. If *x* is a good for man, i.e., if it is perfective of his rational nature, then by the choice to obtain or keep it a man liberates himself from imprisonment to other real but lesser goods, the choosing of which would thwart his freedom to pursue what is better by instilling in him bad habits or propensities.

<sup>17</sup> Simon, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 90.

This intimate linking of greater good to greater freedom applies both to objects which can legitimately be chosen despite their inferiority, and to those which are intrinsically harmful to the agent. Indeed, although it sounds paradoxical, the better the good—the more it confers lasting fulfillment—the freer is the agent in choosing it. In the teaching of St. Thomas, the beatified soul, which cannot turn away from the sight of God, is the most free. It apprehends that good in which nothing is wanting; it therefore *chooses* to love everything which God loves (e.g., divine providence, the predestination of the saints, the hierarchy of heavenly merit), because it *must* love Him in whom it sees the unqualified completion of its being. Loving God as its source and goal, the soul freely loves what God loves. Such ‘unfree freedom’ is pre-eminent because our capacity to choose freely, which enables us to pursue the means towards securing the state of perfection we necessarily and naturally will, reaches its highest peak of voluntary activity when it wills in harmony with the supreme good of the divine nature. Thus Augustine writes:

This is our freedom, when we are subject to the truth; and the truth is God himself, who frees us from death, that is, from the state of sin. For that truth, speaking as a human being to those who believe in him, says, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” For the soul enjoys nothing with freedom unless it enjoys it securely.<sup>19</sup>

To shed light on the above propositions, we need to examine the pivotal distinction made by St. Thomas between *indifferentia potentialitatis* and *indifferentia potestatis*, otherwise called the twofold indifference of the will, passive and active.<sup>20</sup> Consider the following passage from the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, in which the two are contrasted.

<sup>19</sup> On *Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), Book II, §13, 57.

<sup>20</sup> For a more extended discussion, see John of St. Thomas, *Cursus Philosophicus, Philosophia Naturae*, IV 12–2.

To be open to opposites belongs to a certain power in a twofold way: in one way, from the side of itself; in another way, from the side of its object.

From the side of itself, when it has not yet achieved its perfection, through which it is determined to one effect. This openness redounds to the imperfection of a power, and potentiality is shown to be in it; as appears in the case of an intellect in doubt, which has not yet acquired the principles from which to be determined to one alternative.

From the side of its object, a certain power is found open to opposites when the perfect operation of the power depends on neither alternative, though both can be. An example is an art which can use diverse instruments to perform the same work equally well. This openness does not pertain to the imperfection of a power, but rather to its eminence, insofar as it dominates both alternatives, and thereby is determined to neither, being open to both.<sup>21</sup>

Natural liberty, or freedom of choice *simpliciter*, is an indetermination towards many objects or actions, any one of which may be chosen or not, depending on the good apprehended therein. It is the “openness to opposites on the part of the power.”<sup>22</sup> The subject *lacks* determination, which only comes about through specific actions; it is open to all electables, but characterized or shaped by none of them. When goods perspective of man’s nature are chosen, and especially when repeated choices constitute the habit of some virtue, a higher mode of indifference prevails: a *power* or *dominion* over electables, such

<sup>21</sup> SCG Bk. I, ch. 82.

<sup>22</sup> See ST Ia-IIae, qu. 13, art. 6, corp.: “Now the reason why it is possible to choose, may be gathered from a twofold power in man. For man can will and not will, act and not act; again, he can will this or that, and do this or that. The reason of this is seated in the very power of the reason. For the will can tend to whatever the reason can apprehend as good. Now the reason can apprehend as good, not only this, to will or to act, but also this, not to will or not to act. Again, in all particular goods, the reason can consider an aspect of some good, and the lack of some good, which has the aspect of evil; and in this respect, it can apprehend any single one of such goods as to be chosen or to be avoided.”

that the will is strong enough to resist bad attractions with an ease of self-restraint, and secure enough to embrace ardently that which is good. This is the “openness to opposites on the part of the power’s *objects*,” over which it has gained a certain dominion pertaining to the “eminence” of the will. Possessing such plenitude of will, the agent is ‘indifferent’ in the Ignatian sense of the term, having a superabundance of determination to the good that makes it possible for him to rule monarchically over the appetites and passions. He who lives in this moral condition judges more freely and wills more decisively: the good man and the free man are one and the same.

Describing the distinction of *indifferentiae*, Simon writes:

There is an indifference which results from a lack of determination, from an ontological poverty, from a state of potency, an indifference of potentiality. A subject which lacks determination, which is unachieved and thereby *open* to several possibilities is indifferent to the special nature of each of them. On the other hand, there is an indifference which is based upon the achievement of a being, the *fullness* of its determination, an indifference to several possibilities which results from the higher actuality of a cause, its plenitude, its superabundance . . . [moral] Liberty represents an excellent degree of active indifference . . . that goes so far as to imply not only the sheer capacity of eliciting actions qualitatively diverse, but also a *domination* over the attractive aspect of any possible action.<sup>23</sup>

Because man has a perfectible nature, the more he becomes “complete in goodness,”<sup>24</sup> the more acute and potent his faculties will be, just as a well-trained athlete is freer in his motions, capable of perseverance, and less burdened by contrary affections of the body, or as a well-educated mathematician is at liberty to roam in the sphere of higher theory because he has so securely grasped the fundamentals of his science.

<sup>23</sup> Simon, 91–92.

<sup>24</sup> *De Ver. qu. 22, art. 7.*

The athlete’s body and the mathematician’s mind are ‘super-determined,’ in the sense that each is firmly ‘in shape’ for further exercise, each is formed according to purpose, enabling them to excel in the freedom that comes with mastery. This fine-tuning of natural abilities which springs from good habits is presupposed to freedom in any discipline, whether art, sport, or science. Indeed, the notion of habitual determination to the good as a stage prior to genuine freedom is a hundredfold more applicable in the domain of moral action, where liberty in its use and abuse is most evident.

We now understand that even in the poorest of its forms, the form it has in man in his present life, the freedom of the will must be characterized as the outcome of an excess of ontological determination [to good things]. . . . Let it be understood that the development in man of the divine perfection constituted by freedom means, in the first place, that the mastery of the will, its strength, its resolution, its super-determination, prevails over its being passively open to a number of possibilities.<sup>25</sup>

One may object, with good reason, that the evil man is also definite in his character and shows a certain ‘mastery’ over passion—enough to commit a cold-blooded murder or theft, without the prompting of an uncontrollable passion like anger or hunger. While this is certainly true, it says nothing about such a man’s *perfection*. What it does tell us is that liberty can be corrupted to the point where it *parodies* the self-mastery of the good man. The criminal chooses his acts freely, but because he directs himself to things that militate against the good of his individual and social nature, his free choices only serve to deprive him of the rational goods that virtue alone brings. The more cold-bloodedly he acts, the more he can be called a slave to the illusion that his deeds will produce happiness. Money, power, or pleasure they may bring; the perfection of his nature they cannot effect. Such a man is not the plaything

<sup>25</sup> Simon, 93–94.

of his passions, but he is slave to something worse: a false apprehension of the end of human life. The banker who defrauds his client, or the doctor who assists in the suicide of a patient, acts from perversity of will, even if that perversity is highly developed and astutely employed, thus having the same appearance as the athlete's finesse or the mathematician's dexterity. The habitual inclination of his will to *evil* things is a result of his reason's distorted perception of where his good lies. To the extent that he either knew or could know what goods are proper to him as a man, however, he is not free from blame. The banker's or doctor's culpability is directly proportionate to the moral knowledge that was or is available to him in his circumstances; that is to say, guilt begins where invincible ignorance ends.

If our analysis of liberty is correct, it will come as no surprise that St. Thomas discusses the human condition in terms of liberty and slavery. When natural liberty is corrupted by bad acts, the very conditions of moral freedom increasingly vanish, to be replaced by arbitrariness or obstinacy.<sup>26</sup> The incontinent man, for example, is less an agent than a patient (with all of the connotations of sickness that the word conveys), he is more and more passive with respect to uncontrollable and unassuageable appetites for inferior goods. Similarly, although he is certainly in control of the evil acts he painlessly performs, the evil man is less morally free and less capable of performing acts perfective of his nature than even the incontinent. The incontinent man is still fighting, albeit sabotaged by his wayward appetites; the wicked man is set in his ways and would find it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to turn to a life of virtue. Natural liberty gone astray is much like bodily sickness: it is a state of recumbency, of regression. At the worst extreme of corruption, natural liberty is only a

<sup>26</sup> Recall the words of Pope Leo quoted above: "The will, also, simply because of its dependence on the reason, no sooner desires anything contrary thereto than it abuses its freedom of choice and corrupts its very essence" (*Libertas*, §6).

barren power, because the very end it was designed to serve, the completion of man in his rational nature, has been consistently suppressed and repelled by the choice of things that fragment, rather than complete, the person. To the extent that a man is weakened by sin, he has forfeited his aptitude for good judgment. As such, corrupt liberty, sometimes called license, is really not an illustration of moral or perfect liberty at all, but a disgrace to an otherwise noble faculty. In his commentary on the Gospel of St. John, St. Thomas explains the meaning of Christ's words "Whosoever committeth sin is a slave of sin" (Jn. 8:34):

Each thing is whatever belongs to it [*convenit ei*] according to its nature. When, therefore, it moves through a power outside [itself], it does not act according to itself, but rather through another, which is servile. But man is rational according to his nature. When, therefore, he acts according to reason, he acts of himself and according to his free will; and this is liberty. Whereas, when he sins, he acts in opposition to reason, is moved as if by another, and is the victim of foreign misapprehensions. And thus, *whosoever committeth sin is a slave of sin*.<sup>27</sup>

In this comment St. Thomas defines the condition of soul brought about by a right use of man's ability to choose or to determine himself to an end ("proprio motu movetur, et secundum se operatur"), which state he calls *libertas*. The contrary state is one of oppression or limitation ("non operatur secundum se, sed ab impressione alterius"), the result not of force but of moral declination towards things which will hinder a person's completeness. For to act according to reason is to act according to the right apprehension of the end which is perfective of man, and to choose the means suitable to it. Someone who acts with a *misapprehension* of the end does not act reasonably, that is, according to the way his nature is ordered. When he acts in this way, he acts not because of ex-

<sup>27</sup> Cap. 8, lect. 4, n. 3.

ternal compulsion, but because of the false estimation he has made of the object he pursues. This false estimation and the ensuing bad act resemble the condition of a slave because the agent is moved not by the genuine good inherent in the order of reason, but instead by something extrinsic to this order which has the *appearance* of being able to contribute to his lasting good. When this extrinsic bait (whatever it may be) succeeds in luring a man to follow after it, he can truly be called “a victim of foreign misapprehensions,” held in captivity, as it were, by a foreign power and exiled from what is natively best. Plotinus explains the same opposition in words parallel to Thomas’s:

That is enslaved which is not master of its going to the good, but, since something stronger stands over it, it is enslaved to that and led away from its own goods. For it is for this reason that slavery is ill spoken of, not where one has no power to go to the *bad*, but where one has not power to go to *one's own good* but is led away to the good of another. . . . The soul, then, becomes free when it presses on without hindrance to the good by means of intellect, and what it does through this [activity] is in its power. . . .<sup>28</sup>

Christ uses the metaphor of slavery to convey the notion of being arrested and bound by something inimical to one’s perfection as a person, one’s actualization through virtue. Inasmuch as moral weakness and vice are a cramping or chaining of human perfection, they are injuries deeply bruising, like the blows of a harsh master. Thus, whether a man succumbs to temptation or aggressively seeks evil, his declination and deficiency are negative determinations that disfigure his nature, carrying him ever further from the end of happiness he desires. “The slavery of sin does not imply coercion,” St. Thomas writes, “but either inclination, inasmuch as a preceding sin in some way leads to following ones, or a deficiency

<sup>28</sup> Ennead VI.8, in *Plotinus*, vol. VII, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 237–39; 247.

in natural virtue, which is unable to free itself from the stain of sin once it has subjected itself to it.”<sup>29</sup>

While “a slave belongs to another,” a free man “is master of himself.”<sup>30</sup> He who is servile because of his declination or deficiency with respect to man’s true good is trapped in a state of under-developed or under-actualized natural liberty. On the most elementary level he is free to will or not will, but in the realm of moral acts he is lethargic or impetuous at best, black-hearted and destructive at worst, depending on the strength of his passions or the magnitude of his wickedness. His freedom has become, as it were, a free exhibition of capricious urges or deliberate malice. The man who masters himself by living in accord with his nature, on the other hand—he in whom passion obeys reason and reason the eternal law—displays the full stature of a human being, moderate, courageous, just, prudent, noble in his deeds and measured in his words, ready to do without inhibition whatever is honorable, virtuous, fulfilling. Well might we see in such a person the paradigm of liberty, that harmony of will and intellect conducive to man’s completion in goodness. Few but the saints can lay claim to such heroic self-possession and freedom. While we strive to free ourselves from the imperfection of *potentialitas*, we revere the free man who participates in God’s supreme *potestas voluntatis*. “Oh, who is he that hath his whole life long / Preserved, enlarged, this freedom in himself?—For this alone is genuine liberty.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *De Ver.* qu. 24, art. 1, ad 7.

<sup>30</sup> *De regno*, I.1.

<sup>31</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), ed. J. Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, S. Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), Bk. 13, ll. 120–22.