

# THE PARADOX OF FREEDOM AND THE MORAL NECESSITY TO DO THE GOOD

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## **Abstract**

*The notion of freedom is a very controversial one given that different people give it different interpretations. To some it means doing whatever one wants while to others (especially moralists) it means necessarily doing the good. This means that majority find themselves in a very difficult situation to tell what it is. On that understanding, deciding matters relating to freedom has become more controversial today more than any other time before. The aim of this paper is to make an attempt to clarify the meaning of the term freedom. This paper intends to argue that freedom does not contradict the moral necessity to do the good. In other words, the author is of the opinion that the two are compatible, and so to be free means to necessarily do the good. The author, therefore, begins his argument by first making a distinction between free will, free choice, and freedom. He, then, proceeds to a discussion on the moral necessity to do the good (moral obligation) and culminates his argument in an evaluation of the relationship between freedom and the moral necessity to do the good. That is to say, no one is free not to do the good.*

**Key words:** freedom of choice, the good, moral necessity, paradox

## **1.0 Introduction**

It seems paradoxical to talk of *freedom* and at the same time talk of the *moral necessity to do the good*. On the one hand, *freedom* simply means absence of restrictions, absence of conditions or constriction in doing something. In this understanding, it means doing whatever one wants. Battista Mondin, in his *Philosophical Anthropology*, defines freedom as

“...absence of constriction...”<sup>1</sup> According to him, constriction can be due to various causes, reason why we talk of different forms of freedom (physical, moral, psychological, political, and even social among others). Of particular importance to our present discussion is moral freedom.

On the other hand, *moral necessity to do the good* means “doing the good without failure.” It is the moral obligation according to which the good ought to be done and evil avoided. An “obligation is a requirement...to be ‘required to act seems always to involve, at the very least, a serious pressure to perform. This connection with pressure and coercion has seemed to many to be the salient feature of an obligation.”<sup>2</sup> It is generally accepted among rational beings that the good ought to be done and evil avoided. And this is the moral necessity that we are referring to. To be moral, it is imperative that one acts in accordance to the moral law; that requires that good be done and evil avoided.

The former, therefore, implies acting *freely* while the latter implies acting *necessarily* and this sounds contradictory. That man is free yet morally obliged to do the good without exception! With respect to the will (which is free by nature), man naturally desires the good and shuns away from evil. Anything good, to the extent that it is good, is the object of the will. Present two things to man, one good and another one evil and they will automatically choose the good. Give them two things to choose from and both of them be bad or evil and they will not choose any. Yet the will by nature is also free! It is the one by virtue of which man is a free being unlike all other beings, save only for God (who is absolutely free given that there is no composition of potency and act which then would limit His freedom). It seems that we are here left with more questions than there are answers! Or, put in another way, several questions are left unanswered: what is the meaning of free will? How is free will related to free choice? And, how do the two relate with freedom or being free? Put in another language, can man have free will yet they fail to be free? Does free will necessarily entail freedom so that if one has it, then they are free only by that fact? Does the fact that man makes free choices make man a free being or person? Meaning further, is it free choice that makes man free? Is it possible that man makes a free choice without becoming free? Such are only but a few of the kinds of questions that linger in our minds each time one reflects on the reality of freedom.

## **1.1 Free Will, Free Choice and Freedom**

Before we can embark on a detailed discussion on the intimate relationship between freedom and the moral necessity that man does the good (moral obligation or the “ought to be done”), it is very important that we clarify the meanings of free will, free choice, and freedom. Without making the distinction, it will be relatively difficult for anyone to favorably and successfully argue our present claim.

### **1.1.1 Free Will**

To begin with, it is my wish to affirm right from the outset that the three are different or mean different, though they may seem to mean the same.

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<sup>1</sup>Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1991) pg102.

<sup>2</sup>A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political obligations* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981) pg7.

Free will is a faculty of the mind by which man is a free agent or person. In essence, it is the ability of a person to make choices free from certain kinds of constraints. It is the one, as we have observed above, that distinguishes man from every other being that is not free. Free will is part of the essence of man, that together with the intellect make man a rational being (animal). In effect, man is essentially a rational animal by virtue of the two. That is to say that man is gifted with two all-important faculties that characterize and distinguish him as a human being: the intellect and the will. By the intellect, man is a knower, and therefore is capable of attaining intellectual knowledge; this kind of knowledge differentiates man from other animals which only attain sensitive knowledge. By the will, man is a doer, which means, he also performs acts that can be properly called human acts. It is these human acts, as contrasted to acts of man, which makeman a moral agent. Nyasani observes:

The will is the faculty of conscious and deliberate choice of action. It is the faculty of human volition which, in its functionality, must necessarily entail actions which are freely willed and which, in moral education, are referred to as voluntary actions.<sup>3</sup>

Nyasani rightly argues that human acts create the sense of responsibility on an individual (the actor).By his rational nature, therefore, man desires to do the good and avoid evil. This is essentially so given the understanding that man is gifted with two important faculties, intellect and will, that distinguish him as a human being as we have already argued above. It is by virtue of the former that man is a knower while by virtue of the latter man is a doer, or simply put, a moral agent.

With respect to the intellect, man naturally desires to know everything about everything. The desire to know “is simply the inquiring and critical spirit of man.”<sup>4</sup> Besides being pure as Lonergan puts it, the desire to know is also unlimited and detached. For this reason, we maintain rightly that man can, in principle, know everything about everything. Man, even in his sunset days, is still able to know something and, furthermore, has the desire to know more; he remains potentially a knower.

Thanks to the latter faculty, the will, man is a free being. The will by nature is free; it doesn't necessarily follow the dictates of reason (intellect) though it naturally ought to do that:

[...] the will intrinsically and fundamentally aims at the attainment of some good even though that good may sometimes be perverted, immoral and illegitimate. The good that is pursued by the will, provided it is not perverted, is inherently virtuous, lofty and noble since the attainment of any virtuous act must presuppose and involve a deliberately conscious decision, deliberation and sometimes an exercise of serious contemplation. A conscious decision and deliberation, must, **ipso facto**, flow and emanate from the intellect. The intellect...is always behind the acts of the will explicitly or implicitly, or, in other words, the will must always involve the intellect in producing its own effects, unless it chooses to exceed or disobey the dictates and specifications of the intellect. In this latter situation, according to moral philosophers and

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<sup>3</sup>Joseph M. Nyasani, *Metaphysical Psychology: Rational Psychology*(Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 2013)pg 31.

<sup>4</sup>BernaedJ. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958),pg 348.

theologians, a person may stray to sinful acts, or may even commit acts which are inherently reprehensible and condemnable.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, the will acts in its own way, sometimes in accordance to reason and some other times in complete disregard for reason. In reference to what he calls psychological freedom, Mondin states that it is "...the absence of pressures on the part of other human activities on the will to perform these acts in a determined way, such as the intellect or the passions..."<sup>6</sup> This attests to the fact that the will is free by nature. In other words, through the will man can choose to act in accordance to reason or against it, he can choose to act in accordance to the passions or against them. That is what it means by the free dominion of the will. So, essentially speaking, man can act in one way or the other in his exercise of freedom. He can even choose among several options or can as well opt not to choose anything among the available options.

Morton White, on his part, argues to the effect that having free will means that human beings are free to perform actions. He avers that "before proceeding any further, it will be helpful if I say what I mean by the doctrine that we have free will. I mean simply that human beings are often free to perform actions..."<sup>7</sup> In essence, therefore, what White is saying is that a person is free to perform an action only that time when he performs the action if he chooses to perform it; does not perform the action if he chooses not to perform it, and can choose not to perform it.

From the above explanation, we can infer that to have free will is to be able to make a choice among given options or alternatives, or even in the presence of only one option, being able, or having the ability, to choose it or not; that is to say, being able to act without being compelled by anything. This is what Mondin calls psychological freedom, which for him is the mother of all the other forms of freedoms. Without free will, the freedom of man would be illusory. Man would not be free if he didn't have free will. This further explains why man is held responsible for his action; he has control over it. It is him who is the author of his action but he is also able to choose to do it or not; and given that the moral obligation demands that good be done and evil avoided, man is always held responsible for his actions; if good he is praised, if evil he is reprimanded. Mondin adds: "...man is free and that ...freedom cannot identify itself with the human nature, although it makes up part of his essence."<sup>8</sup>

We say that the will is free due to the fact that its action is not conditioned by anything or does not follow the laws of nature; we have abundant evidence to demonstrate that the will can choose to act according to the dictates of reason or not. This is what gives the will its free character. Were it to follow the dictates of reason without failure (the Socratic Mistake), then the will would be deprived of its free character and its act would become a necessary act; an act that could not happen in any other way other than the way it happens. It could be an action that would be controlled by the intellect and therefore, necessitated by it. But that is not what we witness in our actions. Our actions are actions we are in control of, actions we

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<sup>5</sup>Nyasanipg 31.

<sup>6</sup>Mondin, pg103.

<sup>7</sup>Morton White, *The Question of Free will: A Holistic View*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pg8.

<sup>8</sup>Mondin,pg106.

can do or fail to do, actions we can do in one way or another, and hence, free acts. They are acts that are products of the will.

### 1.1.2 Free Choice

By virtue of free will, man is able to make choices of which course of action to take. By, free choice, therefore, we mean a choice that is not conditioned, as we have expressed in the previous paragraph, by anything. What transpires from this is that free choice is a product of free will. If anybody has free will, that person can make (s) free choices. To make a free choice, so to speak, implies to make any kind of choice, whether good or not. And this is the understanding of commoners in the meaning of freedom. They think freedom should mean being able to do anything that one wants no matter what. But ask them, for example, to strip naked in broad daylight and walk around like they do when well dressed, they won't do it. Then you are left to wonder whether such people are free to do whatever they want no matter what!

A free choice, consequently, is a choice that can be good or evil. And we are emphasizing that it is a free choice because it is a product of a free will. We can, thus, deduce that one cannot have free will without being able to make free choices. A free choice is a logical consequence of a free will. Free choices or acts are the ones for which man is held responsible because he is in control of them. Chris Horner and Emrys Westacott, in their book, *Thinking Through Philosophy: An Introduction*, hold that: "When I make certain choices, whether they are trivial or momentous, it usually seems to me that I could have chosen otherwise and am thus responsible for my decision."<sup>9</sup>

Such then are voluntary acts which man can opt to do or not. They differentiate man from animals and are contrasted to involuntary acts because they are specifically human. They are human acts, not acts of man. For Nyasani reiterates, "all human acts as opposed to acts of man are voluntary, deliberated and consciously undertaken. They take place as a result of some conscious and voluntarily willed decision and hence create unshakeable moral, legal and social responsibility for an individual"<sup>10</sup>

In the understanding of Thomas Aquinas, a Mediaeval Philosopher, "...since those acts are properly called human which are voluntary, because the will is the rational appetite, which is proper to man, we must consider acts in so far as they are voluntary."<sup>11</sup> This gives the further implication that such acts are free and deliberate acts of the will. Human acts are acts that man does and is in control of while acts of man are those acts that man does but is not in control of. Acts of man are the acts that man shares with animals like sneezing, acts that happen as a mere choices while acts of man are not. In that regard, man cannot be held responsible for acts of man. For example, you cannot ask a person why they have fallen sick but we can ask them why they steal.

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<sup>9</sup>Chris Horner and Emrys Westacott, *Thinking Through Philosophy: An Introduction*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pg7.

<sup>10</sup>Nyasani pg31.

<sup>11</sup>Summa Theologiae, 1, 1, q. 6.

### **1.1.3 Freedom**

Freedom, on the other hand, is the absence of constriction in human acts. It means being able to act without any restriction whatsoever. In other words, to be free is to do or choose whatever one wants; it means acting without limitation or external pressure. It translates into even being able to say whatever one wants.

But we have already argued to the effect that man's action has a purpose; man acts for a final end, which is happiness, for the simple reason that all that man wants in whatever he does is that he attains happiness. There is no single human act that does not aim at some happiness. The good as 'that at which all things aim' while happiness is 'that for the sake of which everything is done.' Thus, all human acts aim at the good and have happiness as the ultimate end. But the critical question is, "is it every human act that can take man to his final end (happiness)?"

And our obvious answer here is "No." It is not every human act that can make man attain happiness but only good acts take man to his final end. Evil acts take man far away from his final end and are, in that sense, detrimental to man's moral perfection. They deprive him of his perfection of actualizing as a rational being. It is only good moral acts that promote the well-being of the human person.

Now, it is necessary that freedom, which partly defines man, be intimately connected with the final end of man so that a *free act* is or will be an *act of freedom* only if and when it is a morally good act. It is only morally good acts that take man to his ultimate end and not otherwise. We argued earlier on that the will, by nature, desires the good necessarily. It is not free when it comes to the final end of man, happiness! Nonetheless, the will is a free faculty and thanks to it, man is a free being. From this, we find it logically necessary to aver that the will, which is free by nature, and that naturally desires the good (necessarily) characterize man as the kind of being that necessarily chooses the good. Wherefore man is free only if he does the good, because it is only then he will have acted in accordance to his nature (rationally).

In a nutshell, there is a clear cut difference between free will, free choice, and freedom. To have free will is not synonymous with "free choice" or "to be free." One can have free will without necessarily being free although the reverse is impossible. Possessing free will is a *conditio sine qua non* for being free; but is not a sufficient condition for the same. One needs to make good choices in his exercise of free will in order for them to be free.

The freedom of man does not lie in one's ability to choose among alternatives but in the ability to actually make good choices. This implies, necessity of action as opposed to free choice. This is what makes this paper to sound paradoxical, though not contradictory. The paradox is that one can only make a free choice by necessarily doing the good! That the will is by nature free, meaning its action is not necessitated by anything; yet by the same nature, the will desires the good of necessity! That man is free yet morally obligated to do the good.

Thus, to be free is not enough that one has free will - but more significantly, it follows that one acts in accordance to the nature of the will - which always desires the good. One must, therefore, always do the good to be free. By virtue of having free will one can do either good or evil but one must do the good to be a free person. A free person is one who doesn't regret from the action he does but is happy that he did it right.

In truth, man is a free being in the sense that her/his action is not conditioned, the way other objects of nature are conditioned to obey laws of nature, but instead is a free act. Thomas Aquinas argues:

Man does not choose of necessity. And this is because that which is possible not to be, is not of necessity. Now the reason why it is possible not to choose, or 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 for 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, viz., to will or to act, but also this, viz., not to will or not to act.<sup>12</sup>

St. Thomas, hence, holds the position that man acts freely as opposed to acting in a determined manner. He stresses the point that when it comes to particular goods, the intellect can present to the will several objects as good and the will chooses from those options. Yet, in such circumstances, the reason can present as good even that which is evil and the will choose it only on the basis that it was presented as good when it was not. But when it comes to the perfect good (happiness), the will chooses of necessity due to the fact that it cannot be apprehended by the reason as an evil, or as lacking in any way.<sup>13</sup> All said and done, we are left with one critical question to answer; the question of the rational necessity for man to do the good.

## 1.2 Moral Necessity to do the Good

We have already argued to the effect that man has the moral necessity to do the good. In point of fact, to talk of moral necessity to do the good is tantamount to talking of the moral obligation. Man, in this sense, is morally obligated to do the good necessarily yet he is also free to do whatever he wants. In spite of that, moral freedom refers to the absence of constriction through oppressive forces of the moral order such as rewards, punishments, laws, threats.<sup>14</sup> The moral obligation is founded on moral freedom. It, so to speak, entails responsibility. As a matter of fact, there cannot be freedom without responsibility:

[...]moral responsibility is the status of morally deserving praise, blame, reward or punishment for an act or omission, in accordance with one's moral obligations.<sup>15</sup>

What this means, thus, is that to be morally free, one needs to act not from fear of being punished if they don't, not from expectation of reward if they do, but acting in the absence of all these (it means choosing the right course of action in the absence of any such pressures). It means doing the good even when you know that you don't stand to gain or lose anything but

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<sup>12</sup> ST, I/I, q.13,

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Mondin 102.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.wikipedia/freedom>

simply because it is a call of duty that you do the good: “every action that one is morally obligated to perform is an action that one is free to perform.”<sup>16</sup>

In point of fact, freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin. There is no responsibility without freedom nor is there freedom without responsibility.

This demonstrates further the paradox of my argument. This is simply so for the reason that one is left wondering whether man can be free and be morally obliged to do the good without failure. To weak minds, it even sounds contradictory.

In their view, it seems logically impossible that one be free and they be morally obligated to act according to right reason because then it would mean he is not free. To be free, for them is to do whatever one wishes, whether good or evil.

Yet, “in holding ourselves responsible, we imply that we are in control of our actions, that we might act otherwise, and that in adopting one course of action over another we make a free choice.”<sup>17</sup> Horner and Westacott continue to argue that to exercise freedom of the will “means being ultimately responsible for one’s choices.”<sup>18</sup>

The moral necessity to do the good is, consequently, a moral imperative or command. Nevertheless, there is a difference between an action being *obligatory* and an action being *free*. And, “...one cannot...deduce the freedom of an action from its obligatoriness.”<sup>19</sup> That an action is obligatory means that that action ought to be done because it is good; while to be a free act means it is chosen to be done among several other possible actions that would be opted for. In addition, “obligations are limitations on our freedom, impositions on our will, which must be discharged regardless of our inclinations.”<sup>20</sup>

In a roundabout manner, what we are saying is that an action can be free, as a product of free will, without necessarily being obligatory. The further inference that we can make from the above is that one can perform a free act yet that act either doesn’t fall under the moral spectrum or doesn’t obey the moral command so that a free act can even be evil and thus not free, while an obligatory act is always good and free. We, therefore, concede with Morton White, that “...one cannot conceive an action which is both obligatory and not free”<sup>21</sup> on the understanding that all obligatory actions are actions that the agent can choose to perform or not.”

Alternatively, to say that an action is obligatory “[...] is not, of course, to say that one cannot want to discharge an obligation (as when one has promised to take a beautiful woman out for the evening), but rather that obligations, as requirements, are independent of our desires to perform or not.”<sup>22</sup> That would be a contradiction that an action be obligatory and not free. All obligatory actions are free actions, actions chosen to be done for the simple reason that they are good. This is in line with the golden moral law that requires that good be done and evil avoided.

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<sup>16</sup>Whitepg 4.

<sup>17</sup>Horner and Westacott,pg5.

<sup>18</sup>*ibid*.pg6.

<sup>19</sup>*ibid*.pg17.

<sup>20</sup>Simmonspg 7.

<sup>21</sup>White, pg17.

<sup>22</sup>Simmons,pg 7.

### 1.3 Critical Evaluation

The obvious fact that can be deduced from our argument is that there is a mutual relationship between obligatory action and a free action in the sense that obligation means a “requirement” that must be fulfilled while free act means “action chosen to be performed.” We can, moreover, infer that freedom has a necessary relationship with the moral necessity to do the good (moral obligation).

When the obligatory action is chosen action, given that man has a free will by virtue of which he can choose to do or not to do (and this choice includes the morally obligatory), it (the obligatory) necessarily becomes a free act: “what the dictum - which I now regard as a first-level moral law or principle – says is simply that an act is obligatory if it is free, and therefore that an act is not obligatory if it is not free.”<sup>23</sup> The action of the falling of a fruit from the top of a tree is not, or cannot be said to be a free act; and so we can’t call it obligatory! We can’t, for instance, say that the mango ought to have fallen because it isn’t in the control of the mango to fall or not to. Thus, to say that a person ought to perform an action is to say that that person is free to perform it and that it is the act that he must perform.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke maintains that to hold that one is free to do an action, one must say that the agent can perform the action and can avoid performing it so that the one performing the action has the liberty to do it or not to do it.<sup>24</sup> This also shows why freedom is very necessary for moral responsibility. A person is, therefore “morally responsible for performing an action if and only if that person can perform the action and can refrain from performing it[...].”<sup>25</sup> Relating this to the moral obligation, the “ought to be done”, we realize that if a person is morally obliged to a certain action, then that person can perform the action or can refrain from performing it and must be held responsible for it.

### 1.4 Conclusion

To conclude our discussion, it is necessary we affirm that freedom is not doing anything that one wants but rather doing what one ought to do. It follows that freedom is a fulfillment of duty or obligation and not otherwise. Yet, as a rational animal, man has the moral duty to do the good. Hence, his freedom consists in doing the good necessarily. Moreover, we have seen that free will is necessary for the freedom of man, although man does not become free by having free will: he becomes free by doing the good that he ought to do (by choosing the good). A free choice of the good, as a product of free will, makes man free and, therefore, responsible. A responsible person is one who does the good that he ought to do, not what he wants. Thus, freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin. You cannot dispense of one and remain with the other. Therefore, it is absolutely true that freedom is doing whatever one wants, but it is also true that man naturally wants to do the good. So, what other sense would freedom have to man other than that he necessarily does the good? Yet there is no single human being or man who is absolutely free due to the fact that that would require

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* pg26.

<sup>24</sup> John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: T. Basset, 1960) pg238.

<sup>25</sup> White, pg 29.

that one always does the good. For that reason, there is no human beings but beings that look forward to, or who want to be human; the not yet human beings.

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