

## The Will as Mediator between Man and God in Bonaventure's Philosophy\*\*

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to discuss Bonaventure's approach on defining the will and its relation to other faculties of the human soul and to the problem of evil. The will represents a faculty of the soul that defines the tendency or appetite towards a certain thing that is desired; mostly understood as the movement of the soul towards something and, in this sense, one speaks always about the will or desire of a certain thing. An analogy of the divine will and the way it may reflect into human will reflects the manner in which the act of willing is always oriented towards good. According to Bonaventure, the divine will represents the fundament of the universe and of its existence, the real cause of everything that was created. The divine will is also named providence as the carefulness and desire for every man to be saved and perfected. The only remedy to the problem of evil and weakness of the will is to obtain the rectitude of the will as the orientation of the will towards that what is just, morally right and according to the will of God. A right will is defined by a correct evaluation of the self that implies not to judge and criticize the people who commit evil, but to understand that they suffer from a weakness of the will that determines their moral behavior.

**Keywords:** will, Bonaventure, intellect, intention, Medieval ethics.

In defining the human will, Bonaventure affirms that as a faculty of the soul it represents a tendency or appetite towards a certain thing that is desired. The will together with the intellect originate in the memory and it represents one of the three powers that define the human soul as an image of God, especially, the Holy Spirit. Through its interior act, the will is a choice and a desire of self or of God<sup>1</sup>. From a different point of view, the will is also a union of the tendency towards something and reason, as a free activity in a *consensus rationis et voluntatis*. Liberty exists in human nature because of the faculty of the will, the only faculty that is equally infinite to the will of God, considering that the senses and the human intellect are limited. In this case,

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the will is the only faculty that may represent a mediator between man and God, as a bridge of a better understanding of the relationship man-God<sup>1</sup>.

For Bonaventure, the will is oriented towards moral good by the faculty of synderesis that is inherent to the will and not to the intellect, as Thomas Aquinas considers when defining synderesis as a part of the intellect that distinguishes right from wrong, good from evil in moral actions. In practical actions, synderesis represents for the will the same thing as natural light for the intellect in the process of knowing the truth<sup>2</sup>. Because the will is a faculty of the soul, it is more connected to the intellect than to the body in order to lead properly the free acts of the human being towards its own dignity. Bonaventure considers that in the case of the rational soul the will desires naturally something that is good, but if it's not supported by grace it may fall into sin because of its weakness. The role of grace is to assure that the will may desire in an efficient way the moral good, given the fact that the will may also desire evil in an efficient way<sup>3</sup>.

The elective faculty is the one that deliberates, judges and chooses. To deliberate means to analyze what represents the best thing, but something may not be called "better" if it is not compared to that what is "the best". No one knows if a thing is better than another thing if one doesn't know which thing resembles most to that which is the best thing. Nobody may possess the knowledge of resemblance, if one does not first possess the knowledge of the things he has to compare, as the following example offered by Bonaventure may assert: no one may know that "someone resembles Peter" if the one who judges the resemblance does not know Peter. In this case, the one that deliberates must have a natural knowledge of the *supreme good*.

A sure judgment of what one may deliberate is assured according to a certain law. No one judges in a certain way according to a law if one does not have the certainty that that law is just, because the human mind is only self-reflexive and it does not have the capacity of defining or analyzing the law according to what one may judge. This law is superior to human mind and it is offered to men by God. The deliberative power extends its limits in the act of judging something to the divine laws if it offers a complete solution to certain problems that may arise theoretically and practically. Speaking about the will of choosing something, Bonaventure asserts that it has to desire only the supreme good<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Bonaventure, *II Sent.*, d. 25, p. 2, a. 1, q. 1, resp.

<sup>2</sup> Trophime Mouiren, "Voluntas" in Jacques-Guy Bougerol (ed.), *Lexique Saint Bonaventure*, Paris, Editions Franciscaines 9, 1969, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Bonaventure, *II Sent.*, d. 24, p. 1, a. 3: "Est enim in anima rationali voluntas naturalis, qua naturaliter vult bonum, licet tenuiter et exiliter, nisi gratia iuuet, quae adueniens iuvat eam et erigit, ut efficaciter velit bonum. Per se autem potest velle malum efficaciter".

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, III, 4 (Bonaventura, *Itinerariul minții spre Dumnezeu*, Iași, Polirom, 2012, p. 65).

The will represents mostly the movement of the soul towards something; in this sense, one speaks always about the will or desire of a certain thing. An analogy of the divine will and the way it may reflect into human will explains better in which way the act of willing is always oriented towards good. The will is also the faculty of free acting and turning to good or evil marks an important feature that describes it: by desiring a particular thing, the will may always tend to something (*aliquid*) that has been judged and considered valuable by the intellect. This idea, that the will tends to something that the intellect has primarily judged as being valuable, redefines the dignity of the will as being equal with that of the intellect and according to these terms Bonaventure affirms his primacy of the will. Firstly, a person desires something and only after this first act of desire, the intellect may judge if that thing is good or evil and only after this judgment the will may desire something that has been evaluated as good or wrong. Freedom means that someone has the power and the ability to desire in an equal way something that is either good, or bad<sup>5</sup>.

God is the main objective of human will, because by means of the memory the will reflects the image of the Holy Spirit as the love that determines all the actions. In this case, the will represents the main factor of human actions according to divine will in order to re-establish the image of God lost by Adam through the original sin. Being connected to the capacity of acting, the will is also connected to another dimension, that of the body, and in this way, it may be considered a mediator between spirit and matter<sup>6</sup>. The intellect, the will and synderesis are different powers of the soul, but not different essences or substances. A real distinction between the soul and its faculties does not exist in reality and this classification represents just a theoretical approach for a better understanding of the human soul. The conjunction of will and intellect defines the freedom of action in a conscious way<sup>7</sup>.

According to Bonaventure, the divine will represents the fundament of the universe and of its existence, the real cause of everything that was created. The will is the vital movement through which a living being unites in it the efficient and the final causes. The will of God is identical to goodness as the primary cause of everything and any other will cannot be understood if one does not compare it firstly to the divine will: a will that is so just it cannot be distorted and so efficient it cannot be stopped in any possible way expressed as law, prohibition, advice, permission, achievement. The divine will is also named providence as the carefulness and desire for

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<sup>5</sup> Fabio Porzia, "Voluntas", in Ernesto Caroli (ed.), *Dizionario Bonaventuriano*, Padova, Editrici Francescane, 2008, p. 892.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 893.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 891.

every man to be saved and perfected<sup>8</sup>, because Christ represents through the act of His Incarnation the prototype of all mediation between man and God as the Supreme Mediator.

One may say that Bonaventure is never satisfied just with the rational attempt of defining the being of man; he tends to discover the real and proper way of life for man in the universe through a practical reflection. As James P. Reilly asserts, man is more an actor than a spectator in the life which he chooses to live according to his free will and as a Christian to his faith in Christ<sup>9</sup>. For Bonaventure, moral life does not and may not exist without the faith in Christ as a guide for the human will and reason. In the process of mediating between man and God, the will does not just represent a bridge that eases the dialogue between man and God; it reaffirms a way of life that must be chosen each time one decides to trust and have faith in Christ and in the way of life that He proposes. Faith represents a dynamical process and not a statically position of the mind, it must be assured and reassured throughout the entire life of the believer; it is a choice that one makes each time one trusts to follow in his own life the path described by the one in which one believes in accordance with one's own will.

One of the reasons why human will becomes so weak in taking certain decisions is to be found, as Bonaventure asserts, in the fact that the soul has turned its eyes to the beauty of created things instead of contemplating the eternal ones. The only remedy to the problem of evil and weakness of the will is to obtain the rectitude of the will as the orientation of the will towards that what is just, morally right and according to the will of God. A right will is defined by a correct evaluation of the self. Man errors in trying to evaluate his character by referring to beings that do not represent the supreme good and justice, because these beings represent *the object of his primary affective responses* as Reilly asserts<sup>10</sup>, in this sense they are more likely to be chosen for such an evaluation. The "immediate" beings that define a limited form of goodness are more desirable in the first place because they produce an immediate, even though not long lasting, affective response.

Man, as a limited being, defines himself in relation to other limited beings which he loves and desires according to his first attempt of manifesting affection. Love is firstly an act of choice, an expression of the will. Human beings choose to love and who to love because they desire to manifest their affection and receive the affection of other beings. As an act of the will, love represents the most powerful act of choice and in this sense, if oriented to the proper thing and according to the proper hierarchy

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 890.

<sup>9</sup> James P. Reilly Jr., "Rectitude of will and the examined life", in *S. Bonaventura*, Collegio S. Bonaventura Grottaferrata, Rome, 1974, p. 656.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 661.

of love, as Augustine asserts, it represents the proper mean of achieving the rectitude of the will. Man's love must be firstly oriented in loving the Supreme Good and only after this kind of love is achieved, he may manifest his affection on other particular beings<sup>11</sup>. The true definition of a human being is to be found only after it establishes a real and efficient relationship with the Trinity considering the fact that the human soul represents its resemblance.

In many aspects, the freedom and free will of humans may seem contradictory to the contingency that characterizes man: a radically contingent being that possesses an almost absolute liberty restraint only by its ignorance and weakness of the will in achieving the union between human and divine will<sup>12</sup>. In this sense, Bonaventure considers that the task for every person after the fall is to recover the rectitude of the will through the Sacraments of the Church in order to re-establish its soul and mind as image of God. In accomplishing this task man has to struggle with the limitation inherent to his condition as a created being that was "reinforced" after the original sin and with the weakness inherent to a contingent will.

To remedy this weakness of the will man must firstly understand that he has to use his freedom in a correct and rational way, to find a remedy for the perversion of freedom from which he suffers the most in his moral behavior. Only after eliminating this perversion of freedom, the inclination of self-deception and re-orientating the will entirely to God, man may say that he has surpassed the weakness of the will and resolved the problem of evil. The process of re-orientating the will means that man has to find God through his marks and traces left in the entire material and spiritual universe and not to reject the universe. Man finds God and is united with Him, achieving the rectitude of the will, only after he understands and learns that firstly he has to accept the entire creation as a mark (non-rational creatures) or similitude (rational creatures) of God<sup>13</sup>.

Bonaventure understands the universe according to the medieval Christian cosmogony as a book written by the hands of God for the human beings, as if the key of communicating with other living beings is to be found by reading the book of creation. According to such an interpretation, the key to decipher the creation was lost after man has fallen due to the original sin, therefore losing Heaven meant actually losing the possibility of a real and authentic relationship with other creatures, rational or not. And if man does not re-establish such a relationship, he cannot define himself and follow the necessary path of re-uniting himself with God in order to achieve salvation. One does not achieve the rectitude of the will and is not saved if

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<sup>11</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, IV, 1-2, ed. cit., pp. 71-73.

<sup>12</sup> James P. Reilly Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 661.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 663.

one hasn't achieved the equilibrium of having an authentic relationship with the entire creation in order to achieve the possibility of establishing one with the Creator.

Man's moral growth depends in the Christian and Franciscan philosophy of the surrender and submission to evil, only by surrendering one's self to evil, evil may be transgressed. The rectitude of the will is determined by this capacity of the will to be humble and surrender itself to the sufferance of evil in order to surpass it<sup>14</sup>. To surrender to evil means not to judge and criticize the people who commit evil, but to understand the psychological mechanism of a weak will oriented towards evil that drives them into acting in such a manner.

To create and observe a culture of blame, guilt and remorse is not enough in order to re-establish one's moral behavior. Maybe one of the problems that define the secularized contemporary world reflects a deficient understanding of the meaning of guilt related to man as a sinful being. To be aware of the fact that a person is not without sin and that one's life may be filled with errors reflects the humbleness demanded by a Christian way of life, but accepting to be judged and feeling guilt just as a consequence of other people's judgment related to one's moral acts represents a failure of a process of self-evaluation.

The Franciscan way and Bonaventure's way of understanding life define the acceptance of human condition that is weakened by sin and evil, without tolerating and judging the evil behavior, this approach tries to improve it with compassion, love and understanding. A man who suffers and observes evil must not respond with evil, but with kindness, goodness, love and compassion in order to succeed in improving other people's behavior with the help of God's grace, wisdom and will, because only God has the real power of drawing good out of evil.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 667.