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Two ethical theories about the concept of freedom: indifference versus spontaneity**

Abstract: This article examines the relationship between two ethical theories regarding freedom of the will, which are founded on two distinct interpretations of this concept. One perspective is based on the idea that our will is indifferent and that in order to be free, it should exclude any type of determination. The other ethical conception is based on the belief that our volition is spontaneous and that only violence and coercion should be excluded in order to preserve its liberty. However, according to the second theory, freedom is compatible with other types of determinations, such as those influenced by our nature, motives and passions or by our character. I will argue that the first theory was supported in different versions by prominent rationalist thinkers such as Descartes and Malebranche. This conception has gradually changed until it was rejected by other rationalists such as Spinoza and Leibniz, who will assume different versions of the second theory. Nevertheless, I will argue that a more coherent account of freedom as spontaneity was defended by David Hume. Consequently, I will attempt to reveal the subtle and gradual transformation that accompanied the transition from the first interpretation to the latter.

Keywords: liberty as spontaneity, liberty as indifference, human volition, modern philosophy, Ethics.

Introduction

The argument put forth in this paper serves a broader objective, namely, to illustrate how philosophical discourse shifted from the mainly metaphysical concerns characteristic of Cartesian and post-Cartesian thought to the moral and political themes that defined the philosophy of the Enlightenment. And, it is based on the methodological premise that the transition in question can be traced by investigating some subtle transformations in the understanding of the concept of freedom. In order to achieve this objective, I will focus on the debate between some of the main authors of the period under consideration, but I will also trace the

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later echoes of these interpretations. This will serve to confirm the central role played by the notion of freedom in these debates.

More precisely, the paper studies the distinction between two modern explanations of the concept of freedom: freedom as *indifference* and freedom as *spontaneity*. I will argue that this distinction was most clearly theorised by David Hume in his works *Treatise on Human Nature* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and that he used it to react to the dominant rationalist conception of the time and to justify his own theory. The argument will therefore focus on his conception of freedom. However, in order to fully comprehend his perspective, it is necessary to present the contributions associated with the main paradigm to which he also relates and reacts, namely Descartes and Malebranche. Additionally, the theories of Spinoza and Leibniz will be considered, as they have played an important role in the transition from the first interpretation to the second. And, I will assume that the controversy between Hume and this tradition could be better described as a gradual shift in the explanation of the concept of freedom of the will, from the theory of freedom as indifference to the theory of freedom as spontaneity. Nevertheless, it should be evident that this evolution didn't end with the theory of David Hume. But, it can be argued that his perspective offers the most comprehensive and coherent understanding of the concept of freedom as spontaneity.

Descartes and his *robust* theory of freedom as *indifference*

In her study dedicated to Hume's description of the relation between reason and passion included in *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise*, Jane McIntyre observed that Hume's account of freedom of the will must be interpreted as a reaction to the predominant view among scholastic and modern authors that there is a hierarchy of the human spirit or mind, with reason occupying the most important position. According to this view, it is a faculty that plays a central role in the process of our knowledge, but also in our moral life. Consequently, reason was perceived as the superior faculty, which, in conjunction with free will, enables humans to regulate and direct the force of the passions and to live a moral life (McIntyre 2006, 201-204).

Of course, there were also significant differences between the perspectives of the authors who supported this privileged status of reason. In the view of the Christian philosophers, who were proponents of free will, human freedom was to be understood as escaping from the chain of natural determinations in order to give us the possibility of directing our choice towards both good and evil. This would thus give meaning to notions of moral responsibility. However, they have encountered significant challenges, such as reconciling the existence of an Almighty and All-Wise God with the existence of evil in the world.

Nevertheless, the most explicit expression of this concept of freedom can be found in the works of Descartes. In his conceptualisation, the will was understood as a capacity or power of self-determination, which made human action an object of moral evaluation. In the sentence 37 from his *Principles of Philosophy*, the French philosopher states that the main perfection of man is to have free will, which makes him worthy of praise or blame and “the author of his actions” (of giving or withholding consent). He further asserts, in the sentence 39, that this freedom of the will is self-evident and that our knowledge of it needs no other proof (Descartes 2008, 206). This point is also made by Desmond Clarke in his book, *Descartes’s Theory of the Mind*, where he notes that, in the French thinker’s view, the will is conceived as a distinct power or ability that human agents have and in virtue of which some of their actions can be morally evaluated. Furthermore, Clarke maintains that for Descartes, the freedom of the will is one of the most common innate notions (2005, 139). For Descartes, the will is an essential attribute of the thinking substance, as characterised in the second meditation: “But what therefore am I? A thinking thing. What is that? I mean a thing that doubts, that understands, that affirms, that denies, that wishes to do this and does not wish to do that, and also that imagines and perceives by the senses” (Descartes 2008, 20).

In the sentence 32 from his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes affirms that there are only two modes of thinking, the perception of the understanding and the action of the will: “All the modes of thinking that we experience within ourselves can be brought under two general headings: perception, or the operation of the intellect, and volition, or the operation of the will. Sensory perception, imagination and pure understanding are simply various modes of perception; desire, aversion, assertion, denial and doubt are various modes of willing” (1985, 204). And, in his *Fourth Meditation*, he elucidates the genesis of errors as a consequence of the discrepancy between the limited capacity of our intellect and the unlimited capacity of our free will. Given that the will is considerably more extensive than the intellect, it is not constrained by the same limitations. Instead, it is extended to include phenomena that are, in themselves, indifferent to us. This can lead us to deviate from the path of virtue and choose evil over good, or falsehood over truth: “So what is the origin of my errors? It can only be this: that, since the range of the will is greater than that of the intellect, I do not confine it within the same limits, but extend it even to matters I do not understand; and since it is indifferent to these, it easily falls away from the true and the good, and this is both how I come to be deceived and how I come to sin” (2008, 42).

Moreover, he asserts that the will is so unlimited that it is beyond our capacity to conceive a will that is wider and vaster. This quality of the will is said to resemble divinity. The will is characterised by the sense of *indifference*

that arises when we are not inclined to act in a particular direction. We do not experience any external constraint when we choose to act: “This is because it consists purely in our ability to do or not to do a given thing (that is, to affirm or deny something, pursue something or avoid it); or rather, it consists purely in this: that we are moved in relation to that which the intellect presents to us as to be affirmed or denied, pursued or avoided, in such a way that we feel we are not being determined in that direction by any external force” (2008, 41).

In an investigation dedicated to Descartes’s view about freedom, included in the *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes and the Meditations*, Gary Hatfield argues that we actually can identify two different theories about freedom in the argument cited above: “The first is freedom of indifference. Such freedom consists in the ability to determine ourselves to choose one way or the other, that is, to go either way in any given instance. The second conception finds our freedom in our acting in accordance with our own will, as opposed to our acts being determined by external force or constraint. This is called the freedom of spontaneity (where ‘spontaneous’ means self-acting but not necessarily uncaused). As described by Descartes, this spontaneous choice may be completely determined by our nature” (Hatfield 2003, 193-194). Hatfield believes that the difference between the two conceptions could be expressed in the opposition between *compatibilism* and *non-compatibilism*. However, this opposition should not be interpreted as an internal contradiction of his theory because, he insists that “Descartes might consistently hold that freedom is compatible with inner determination, but also hold that in some circumstances we choose in a way that is not internally determined (not determined by the clear perception of the intellect, or any other factor) (2003, 194). And he adds that Descartes’s conception requires both these conceptions about freedom in order to function properly. He needs the theory of freedom as spontaneity in order to hold God responsible for the truth of clear and distinct perceptions (which determines us internally to choose in accordance to them). But, in the same time, he needs the theory of indifference in order to make us responsible for our errors. Therefore, he believes that the origin of error is associated with a “privation” or “lack” in us that “comes from not following the rule that the will should be determined in judging by clear and distinct perceptions” (2003, 198).

While he admires Descartes’s subtle and skilful solution, Hatfield admits that the solution is not without problems. Because, Descartes had to acknowledge that God could have impressed the clear and distinct perceptions in an unforgettable manner in or memory. And, he didn’t do that because greater perfection resulted from variability (2003, 198). So, how are we supposed to understand the relation between Descartes’s two conceptions about freedom? In my opinion, the only answer could be that

the freedom in its most fundamental state should be understood as indifference. And, this interpretation is confirmed by his statement that, in the absence of natural or divine guidance, the will is in its most basic state, characterised by a sense of *indifference* towards the choice of good or true. However, when the individuals are receiving guidance from a natural or divine source, they will no longer feel indifferent and will act in accordance with what they perceive to be good and true. Nevertheless, the default freedom remains unaffected, because as Descartes notes: “Certainly, neither divine grace nor natural knowledge [*cognitio*] ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary, they increase and reinforce it” (Descartes 2008, 41).

Consequently, in a paradoxical manner, Descartes asserts that the essence of our will and our greatest perfection is derived from our capacity to choose, which is free from any determination, even if it means deviating from the domain of the clear and distinct perceptions of the truth, which is guaranteed by God. Therefore, it can be argued that our greatest perfection is most evident in those choices which express our lack of perfection and are the source of our errors. But, there is a certain tension between the idea of our unlimited will being perfect and the fact that it is also indifferent and blind, which makes it the source of our errors and sins. Furthermore, there is another tension between the view that our volition is fundamentally undetermined and the idea that our intellect is capable of influencing our will and directing our choices in accordance with the clear and distinct perceptions of the truth. It could be said that this creates an opposition between volition and intellect, which is challenging to overcome in order to explain how the two faculties of our mind will collaborate in the process of our knowledge and in our moral life. Therefore, I believe we should ask if there is any way in which Descartes could provide a resolution to this apparent contradiction.

As I argued in a previous paper, a key concept in understanding his view concerning the relation between will and intellect is the notion of *attention*. I have emphasised the fact that the power of the will and the perception of the intellect are brought closer together in the act of focusing attention on a particular content of our mind. And attention is an essential concept for understanding the Cartesian method of discovering the truth in science, as it was exposed in his works *Discourse of the Method*, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Țuțui 2018, 33-36). As was suggested by Cristina Santinelli, attention could be interpreted as an essential element which was added by Descartes to the relation between the epistemic subject and his object, in order to explain the process of our knowledge. And, attention should be understood as the orientation of the epistemic subject towards his object (Santinelli 2018, 51-52).

Consequently, the act of focusing our attention is accompanied by the collaboration between reason and volition. However, is this collaboration sufficient to negate the discrepancy between our willpower and our intellect? In other words, is it sufficient to negate Descartes' preference for the concept of freedom as indifference in favour of the notion of freedom understood as spontaneity? In my opinion, the answer to this question is obviously negative. And, I believe that a clear demonstration of this statement can be found in the aforementioned sentence 32 from his *Principles of Philosophy* where he postulates that there are only two *modes of thinking*, the perception of the intellect and the action of the will. Hence, although they are characterised in a similar manner as “modes of thinking” they do not coincide. As it is evident from characterization of man's nature as *res cogitans*, as a thinking thing, Descartes had at least two meanings in mind when he used the term “thinking”: he used it to refer to the *activity* of thinking that can take the form of will, imagination, feeling, and so on, but he also used it to refer to thinking as a *substance*, as the essence of human nature. In other words, people do not just think, in one form or another, listed above. They should be conceived as “thinking substances”. And I added that we must distinguish between our nature as “thinking substances” and the modes of this substance which are the perceptions of our intellect and the determinations of our will (Țuțui 2018, 37). However, it is clear that these two modes will always retain their distinctive characteristics, and that it is not possible to reduce either of them to the other.

Therefore, someone could rightfully argue that the aforementioned problem will persist. A similar tension will emerge between the two modes of thinking which are collaborating in the process of focusing our attention. And, Descartes still has to provide a more compelling explanation for the origin of errors. This entails elucidating the manner in which our attention is diverted from the most valuable content of our intellect, namely the clear and distinct perceptions of the truth. But, the French thinker was not able to provide a satisfactory solution to this problem. And, without going into further details, it is worth noting that Descartes's conception was also confronted with other serious objections. As it was noticed by Desmond Clarke, the most important of them was the well-known problem of explaining how voluntary actions that are taking place in the soul can affect the body and vice versa (Clarke 2005, 135).

Malebranche and his *thin* theory of freedom as *indifference*

The theory of freedom as indifference is also evident in the works of another significant author of the period, Nicolas Malebranche. However, his view is less robust than the Cartesian view. Malebranche attempted to

address the issues raised by Cartesianism by adopting his famous Occasionalist position, which holds that humans are only the occasional causes of their actions, with God being the efficient cause of all change and choice. Consequently, as in was suggested by Patrick Riley, Malebranche's conception offers little room for the freedom of human will. Our liberty is reduced to the simple act of consenting to or suspending consent to the inclinations we have toward good and order, which are predetermined in us by God. According to Malebranche, humans are free and responsible in the sense that they must consent to a motive. God creates an inclination in them through an Augustinian delight toward good or order in general, and they must experience this delight in order for the consenting to be possible (Riley 2000, 254).

Malebranche's theoretical approach also differed from Cartesianism in regard to his understanding of the nature of the passions. He rejected Descartes's view according to which passions should be understood as a consequence of the union between body and mind. And, he described them as impressions from God, the Author of Nature: "The passions of the soul are impressions from the Author of nature that incline us toward loving our body and all that might be of use in its preservation - just as the natural inclinations are impressions from the Author of nature that primarily lead us toward loving Him as the sovereign good and our neighbour without regard for our body" (Malebranche 1997, 338).

The aforementioned account of the passions could prompt the question of whether Malebranche allows for any type of freedom of the will. He acknowledged this possible objection and expressed his concern that this thesis could be interpreted in such a way as to reject the possibility of human freedom and to make God the author of sin. For example, in the *Elucidation one* to his main work *The Search after Truth*, he expresses this concern as follows: "Some people hold that I gave up the mind's comparison with matter too soon, and they imagine that it is no more capable than matter of determining the impression God gives it. They would have me explain, if I can, what God does in us and what we ourselves do when we sin, because in their opinion, my explanation would make me either agree that man is capable of giving himself some new modification, or else recognize that God is the true cause of sin" (1997, 547).

That is why he will explicitly assume that humans have in themselves a principle of their determinations which cannot be found in nature. And he describes what God does in us in the following manner: "First, God unceasingly impels us by an irresistible impression toward the good in general. Second, He represents to us the idea of some particular good, or gives us the sensation of it. Finally, He leads us toward this particular good" (1997, 547). But, he adds that God does not lead us in a necessary or invincible way to love that particular good. We *feel* that we can stop this love

and we have the impulse to go further and even against it. And, this is precisely what a sinner does: “He stops, he rests and he does not follow God’s impression – he does nothing, for sin is nothing” (1997, 548).

Hence, he assumes in a clear and unambiguous fashion the interpretation of freedom based on this *feeling of indifference* which explains the voluntary nature of our choices. This allows him to conclude that human power of will should be understood as a principle of self-determination we have in ourselves, which “is always free with regard to particular goods” (1997, 548). And, indeed, this assertion is in accordance with the manner in which the author describes the human will in *The Search after Truth*: “Nevertheless, the power of volition, though it is not essential to it, is inseparable from mind - as mobility, though not essential to it, is inseparable from matter. For just as immovable matter is inconceivable, so a mind incapable of willing or of some natural inclination is inconceivable. But again, as matter can conceivably exist without any motion, likewise can the mind conceivably be without any impression of the Author of nature, leading it toward the good; and consequently it can be without any volition, for the will is nothing but the impression of the Author of nature that leads us toward the good in general, as has been explained at length in the first chapter of this work” (Malebranche 1997, 199).

Consequently, we can notice that Malebranche also postulates an elementary type of freedom as indifference, although he no longer associates it with a robust manifestation of the will as Descartes did. This stage of the mind exists without any will, just as matter can exist without any movement. Nevertheless, in Malebranche’s view the scope of our liberty is significantly diminished. Therefore, it is not possible for humans to experience the sensation described by Descartes in his *Fourth Meditation*, namely that their will is not subject to any external influence (2008, 41). In the conception of the Oratorian, freedom as *indifference* is reduced to consenting or suspending our consent for the inclinations toward the good and the order, which are predetermined in us by God. Yet, this type of freedom is still present, although his conception can be understood as an obvious step in the direction of freedom understood as *spontaneity*.

Spinoza’s view: the transition to *spontaneity*

Echoes of this controversy between the theory of freedom as indifference and the theory of freedom as spontaneity can be found in Spinozism. As it is well-known, Spinoza claimed that all things are inevitably present and predetermined by God, yet not in accordance with free will or benevolent intent, but rather in accordance with their intrinsic nature. In Theorems 32 and 33 from the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza asserts that volition cannot be considered a free cause, but rather a necessary one.

Furthermore, he postulates that things could not have been produced by God in any other form than the one in which they were produced (1994, 105-106). In Theorem 48, from the second part of the *Ethics*, he affirms that the soul lacks absolute or free will: “In the mind there is no absolute, or free, will, but the mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, an so to infinity” (1994, 146). And, in the corollary to theorem 49, he eliminates the specific character of volition and reason by claiming that will and intellect are one and the same, because they are nothing apart from singular volitions and ideas themselves which are said to be the same (1994, 147).

However, in the final part of the *Ethics*, he acknowledges that the essence of the soul or its power is solely constituted by thought. In the theorem 10 from this part dedicated to human freedom, he states that “so long as we are not torn by affects contrary to our nature, we have the power of ordering and connecting the affections of the body according to the order of the intellect” (1994, 250). He then proceeds to argue that the exercise of thought can lead to the acquisition of accurate knowledge of the divine nature and to the intellectual love of God, which is the same as happiness. Alternatively, it can result in the retention of inadequate knowledge and the domination of the passions.

As we can notice, Spinoza’s view about our freedom is indeed puzzling because, while he explicitly rejects the idea of free will, he nevertheless allows us a type of freedom of the intellect to order our affections and to cultivate the authentic knowledge and the intellectual love for God. And, this problem was noticed by some of his contemporaries. For example, in a letter from 8 October 1676, Tschirnhaus states that, in his opinion, although Spinoza argues against free will and Descartes argues for free will they both conceive freedom. But, he believes that Descartes was right in affirming that in certain matter we are not determined by any cause and therefore we are free. And, in order to explain, he uses the example of his decision to write that letter to Spinoza. Even though he admits that there are some causes that could influenced him in that decision, his conscience tells him that the act of writing it nonetheless his decision: “But I also affirm as certain, on the evidence of consciousness and with notwithstanding these reasons, I really can omit this [act of writing]. It seems impossible to deny this. Also, if we were compelled by external things, who could acquire the habit of virtue? Indeed, on this assumption, every wicked act would be excusable” (1996, 266).

In his reply, Spinoza uses his famous comparison between the so-called conscience of human freedom and the situation of a stone that has received a quantity of movement and will move out of necessity: “Next, conceive now, if you will, that while the stone continues to move, it thinks, and

knows that as far as it can, it strives to continue to move. Of course, since the stone is conscious only of its striving, and not at all indifferent, it will believe itself to be free, and to preserve in motion for no other cause than because it wills to. And this is the famous human freedom which everyone brags of having, and which consists only in this: that men are conscious of their appetite and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined” (1994, 268). And he even accepts the consequence of this statement that virtue and vice would be characterized as necessary and constant dispositions of human mind, and that people could be said to be virtuous or evil by necessity. Moreover, in the final part of his letter he challenges Tschirnhaus to provide a better explanation of the concept of the human virtue which arises from the free decree of the mind, and is also compatible with God’s preordination (1994, 264).

But, are these arguments compelling? In my opinion they are not. If we analyse them more closely, we find that the examples he uses to support the above comparison between human action and the necessary movement of the stone are all problematic: an infant who cannot control his hunger, a drunkard, a madman, a man who dreams and cannot distinguish between the experience of that dream and real life. But these examples are in no way representative of the cases that are supposed to illustrate free action. And, as Olli Koistinen posits in his study entitled *Spinoza on action* included in the *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethic*, this view on human agency seems desperate, comparing it not with a picture of the captain of a ship called our body, but with the picture of the passenger in a ship pushed by God. However, he argues that this picture is misleading because Spinoza does not completely abandon the idea of human freedom: “Human beings are capable of freedom, not of freedom of choice but of freedom of origination as one might call it” (2009, 181).

And, he explains this revisionary theory of agency by referring to the concept of *conatus*, or the striving to exist, a notion that plays an important role in the work of Spinoza. He adds that not only the body strives to exist, the mind has a *conatus* of its own which is called *Will*, when it is related only to the mind and is called *Appetite* when it is related to the mind and body together. Appetite together with the consciousness of that appetite is called *Desire*. Koistinen notices that although this description of the *conatus* seems to suggest that human motivations is heavily body-guided, in fact Spinoza gives the mind a rather strong role in the fifth part of the *Ethics*, where he claims that the mind has some power over the affects, saying that the mind has its own motivational force. Hence, he will conclude: “Thus, there is room in Spinoza for a battle between the intellect and the body. The characteristic action of the body-independent part of the mind is thinking through adequate ideas, which could be described as adequate thinking” (2009, 184).

Thus, if we compare Spinoza's theory of freedom with that of Descartes or Malebranche, we can see that he goes one step further in the transition from indifference to spontaneity. Firstly, he explicitly denies any difference between the will and the intellect. So, there is no place for the conflict between the will and reason, which in Cartesianism was seen as the source of error. Secondly, there is no such thing as the power of the mind to consent or to suspend consent for the inclinations we feel toward the good and the order, which was a central idea in the conception of Malebranche. Therefore, the scope of human freedom is restricted even further by being reduced to a motivational force, a *conatus* of the mind involved in the process of thinking through adequate ideas. Hence, there is no room for freedom as indifference in his view. The only type of freedom that is compatible with his moral philosophy is the one based on the concept of spontaneity. And, if we were to paraphrase the aforementioned argument provided by Gary Hatfield, this is the only notion of freedom that seems to be compatible with the determinations that influence our choices, and particularly with strictly deterministic conceptions centred on the idea of God's providence.

Leibniz and the impossibility of freedom as indifference

The interpretation of freedom as indifference was also rejected by another prominent rationalist thinker, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. He also tried to solve the problems of Cartesianism, and particularly the problem of the communication of substances, by stating that "only souls or soul-like entities could qualify as substances" (Jolley 1994, 7). This is his celebrated theory of monads, conceived as spiritual atoms, which are distinguished by a singular and fundamental quality: their perception. This perception is said to represent a multiplicity within a unity. According to his perspective, consciousness or *apperception* is a specific type of perception that is exclusive to monads that are also minds. And, he believes the monads change their perceptions because of an internal principle called *appetition*. All the monads are continually striving to change their perception, but, as it is explained by Lloyd Strickland, this striving is not always conscious. In this sense, he distinguishes between three types of monads: bare monads, animal souls and minds. At the level of bare monads the striving is automatic. At the level of animal souls it takes the form of an inclination that is *felt*, a passion. But, only at the level of the minds the striving is conscious and it "takes the form of the will, where the perception is an intellectual striving" (Leibniz 2014, 66-69).

Furthermore, in the *Monadology* he states that the natural changes of the monads originate from an internal principle, as an external cause could not penetrate inside the monad (Leibniz 2014, 25). In the sentence 79, he claims

that souls act in accordance with the laws of final causes, through appetites, ends and means, while bodies act in accordance with the laws of efficient causes, namely those of movement. Furthermore, he maintains that the two empires of efficient causes and of efficient and final causes are in harmony with each other (2014, 144). However, while supporting the thesis of pre-established harmony, Leibniz asserts that it does not invalidate human freedom. This is because pre-established harmony merely inclines without forcing man to choose certain options.

But should we understand this freedom in the sense of indifference or in the sense of spontaneity? A clear answer is provided in one of his short philosophical text which is dedicated precisely to the topic of the nature of free will. In this text, Leibniz defines the concept of will as “an effort that one makes to act, because one has found it good” (Leibniz 2006a, 92). That is why he states categorically that we are free because we are the masters of our actions, when we do everything that we will, with the condition that it does not surpass our powers and our knowledge. Because, he believes that freedom should be opposed not only to the constraint exercised by an external force, but also to ignorance. However, Leibniz acknowledges that some people won't be satisfied with this concept of freedom: “But we demand something further; we are not content with the freedom to act, but also claim a freedom to will what we would will to will, which is a contradictory thing, and would be dangerous if it were possible” (2006a, 92). In his opinion, the “freedom to will everything that one would will” would mean an infinite regress. Because, if someone would ask me why I will something, and I respond “because I will to will”, he will be entitled to ask me again “Why do you will to will?” and so on and so forth. So, Leibniz states that the reason for willing should not be taken from the will, but from the understanding, because it is our nature to will what we believe to be the best. And, next he will reject the notion of freedom as indifference in an explicit and unambiguous manner: “Therefore there is no freedom of indifference, as it is called in the Schools. For the freedom to will that many claim, and that they say consists in indifference, such that we can suspend action and will without any reason that moves us to it, is not only an impossible thing, since every created being has some cause, but also useless, and something which would even be dangerous; so much so that we would not be liable to thank nature if it had given us so irrational a faculty” (2006a, 93).

And, he adds that this concept is also in contradiction with the supposition that our freedom must be a human perfection, because this type of indifference is rather indicative of a great imperfection. That is why he will conclude that freedom is nothing else than the power to reason carefully about things and to act in conformity with what we have judged to be the best. Nevertheless, he suggests that freedom can be mixed with some constraint, because our reasoning is connected with the movements of the body, which are influenced by the external impressions. Moreover, he affirms

that other influences like sudden encounters, great passions, prejudices, customs and even diseases could make us “will and act before we have reasoned”. But, the more we will educate ourselves not to rush into thing, the freer we will become (2006a, 93-94).

Another brief text that is particularly pertinent to the subject matter of this paper is entitled *On freedom and spontaneity*. The ideas are presented in a very systematic way, starting with a definition of freedom as “spontaneity joined to intelligence”. He adds that what it is called spontaneity in beast and other substances without intelligence, it is called freedom in humans. Next he explains the concept of spontaneity as contingency without compulsion or something that it is neither necessary, nor constrained. In his view, indifference is opposed to determination, which is a state where there is a reason that inclines us towards an action rather than another. And he clearly postulates that all actions are determined and never indifferent and that *freedom as indifference is impossible* even in God. Because he claims that God is determined by his nature to do the best and this is the very definition of perfection. Analogously, the more humans act in conformity with the reason the freer they are. Their servitude comes from their actions in accordance with the passions (2006b, 94).

Therefore, an analysis of Leibniz’s perspective on the freedom of the will and its relationship to the perceptions of the intellect reveals that he seems to take a categorical step towards the integration of will and rationality. He also leaves little room for a Cartesian type of conflict between the will and the intellect, which provided an explanation for the origins of errors and sins. And, even more categorically than Spinoza, he postulates the impossibility of freedom as indifference. He thus explicitly adopts the theory of spontaneity, which is compatible with his view of God’s providence and the thesis of pre-established harmony. However, while his theory seems to be more systematic and coherent than that defended by Spinoza, he faces a similar challenge in trying to explain common ideas as vice and virtue. Consequently, we can see once again that the more an author insists on the role played by God’s providence in the moral life of man, the more he will be inclined to the concept of freedom as spontaneity, and the less he will be inclined to the concept of freedom as indifference.

Hume’s revision: a more coherent theory of freedom as spontaneity

Returning now to Hume’s conception, we must note that his doctrine of the relationship between reason and the passions, according to which reason can be nothing but the slave of the passions, did not allow him to assume the predominant conception presented above and to assert that the domination of reason over the passions would be the key to understanding the nature of the free will and the possibility of moral choices. Referring to

this point, author Terence Penelhum stated: “If reason is thus shown to be incapable of originating our choices and inclinations, then on those occasions when we make choices in opposition to a passion, it cannot be reason that moves us: reason cannot provide the necessary contrary ‘impulse’ itself” (Penelhum 1993, 128). As a result, Hume was compelled to propose an alternative account of the human will and its functioning, one that does not refer to the dominance of reason over the passions. Therefore, he will strive to offer an account of the will and its function that would appear paradoxical to those who adhere to the rationalist conception previously described. This is a version of *compatibilism*, which states that it is possible to hold that human actions are caused and yet are free (Penelhum 1993, 129). For this reason, in his *Treatise*, he provides an explanation for the notion of human volition that makes no reference to the alleged force of the intellect: „I desire it may be observed, that by the will, I mean nothing but the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind” (Hume 1960, 399).

And, Hume articulates his conception of volition by explicitly mentioning the distinction between the two interpretations of the concept of freedom, which are the subject matter of this article: freedom as *spontaneity* and freedom as *indifference* (1960, 407). He adds that the first type of freedom is opposed to violence and is possessed by every man who is not the victim of a coercion exercised with violence that restricts his ability to choose a particular course of action. The second kind of freedom is opposed to necessity and would presuppose the absence of any causal influence or determination acting on the human will.

From Hume’s perspective, the primary error that philosophers make when contemplating the concepts of freedom and necessity is to assume that there is an irreconcilable distinction between the relationship between cause and effect, on the one hand, and that between motives (or preferences, inclinations) and voluntary actions, on the other. The surprising character of human actions is not attributable to any absolutely free and, therefore, unpredictable manifestation of human will. Rather, it is the result of our simple inability to discover the connection between motives and actions. Similarly, the surprising character of some natural events is not generated by any spontaneous manifestation of effects. Instead, it arises from the complexity and contrariness of the causes that determine effects different from those we normally expect. Consequently, he will argue that the conjunction of motives and voluntary actions is as constant and uniform as that of cause and effect in any part of nature (2007, 64).

Moreover, he posits that the natural and moral evidence are so intricately intertwined, forming a unified argument, that it is reasonable to conclude that they are of a similar nature and originate from a common set of

principles. Furthermore, Hume provides the example of a prisoner who is led to the gallows and foresees his death as certain, basing this on the firmness and fidelity of the guards and the operation of the axe or the wheel. And, he suggests that in this example, there is a single chain of natural causes and voluntary actions, with no discernible distinction between them for the spirit (2007, 66).

Thus, it can be argued that the aforementioned error arises from the misconception that the relationship between cause and effect can be fully explained by delving deeply into the powers of nature and establishing a perceived necessary connection between them. This is combined with the belief that no such connection exists in the case of the operations of the human spirit. However, his critique of the concept of causality suggests that even with regard to the purported natural necessity that connects causes and effects, we are only aware of what experience teaches us about their ordinary conjunction: that one follows the other. The same is true of motives and actions. Actions are typically preceded by motives, inclinations, circumstances, or other factors that influence the will. Consequently, if we assume that there is no distinction in nature between the two, and this aforementioned illusion is dispelled, the question arises: “For what is meant by liberty, when applied to voluntary actions? We cannot surely mean, that actions have so little connexion with motives, inclinations, and circumstances, that one does not follow with a certain degree of uniformity from the other, and that one affords no inference by which we can conclude the existence of the other” (2007, 68-69).

Thus, in Hume’s view, human freedom can only take the first form described above, that of spontaneity, as he states in his work, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*: “By liberty, then, we can only mean a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains” (2007, 69).

But how, then, might one explain the prevailing notion that genuine freedom, in the sense of indifference, should be understood as independence from any kind of causal influence? Hume thinks that it is based on a confusion, namely that between the two kinds of freedom mentioned above, to which is added what he calls the “false sense of indifference” generated by the fact that we can imagine that we could have acted otherwise and that our will is not itself affected by any influence. However, in his *Treatise* he claims that the only experience that matters is not this illusory feeling of indifference, but the more objective perspective that the neutral observer would have on us who could infer, as Hume says, how we would act if he knew our motives and character (1960, 407-408).

And, in his work *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, after he presents the aforementioned definition of liberty, he explicitly rejects the theory of freedom as indifference: “And if the definition above mentioned be admitted; liberty, when opposed to necessity, not to constraint, is the same thing with chance; which is universally allowed to have no existence” (2007, 69).

To the critic who would argue that the influence which motives have on the will should not be regarded as a form of necessity, and that motives are not true causes of behaviour, Hume replies that this is merely a verbal dispute: he may use another word if he does not like the term “cause” provided he admits that motives (e.g. those connected with laws which are based on reward or punishment) have a constant and uniform influence on the mind producing good actions and preventing bad ones (2007, 70-71).

Nevertheless, it is possible to question whether such a conception can still explain the notion of responsibility. Hume anticipates the criticism that the theory he proposes could have hazardous consequences for individual responsibility. However, he considers this pervasive mode of reasoning to be both erroneous and condemnable. He maintains that if an opinion can be dismissed on the grounds of its absurdity, it should not be rejected solely on the basis of its potential for harm. Moreover, he argues that his view regarding the necessity of associating human actions to motives, inclinations and circumstances is implicitly accepted by philosophers and theologians alike. It is only the specific manner in which they differentiate between necessity and natural causality on the one hand, and the determinations of the will, on the other, that makes them refuse to utilise the terms causality and necessity when discussing human actions. If, however, one gets beyond this “terminological” dispute, they will discover that his theory of freedom is not only harmless to morality, but is even essential to its support (2007, 70).

Therefore, he believes that this re-signification of the concept of liberty is required in order to safeguard the very notion of responsibility. We do not blame people for acts they do unknowingly or by chance precisely because the principles of these actions are transitory and find their end in themselves. Only where actions are indications of character, drives and internal inclinations can they give rise to blame or praise. This view of freedom is, however, open to criticism on the grounds that if human actions are subject to the same necessity as the operations of matter, then there is a continuous causal chain of necessary causes from which nothing escapes. This would nullify human responsibility, with the ultimate responsibility resting with the creator of the world. This objection is said to have two sides. The first argument suggests that if human actions are inextricably linked to the divine, they can only be perceived as malevolent. The second argument postulates that if human actions are, in fact, criminal, then we should reconsider the attribute of perfection that we attribute to divinity, since it would be the author of these acts. The first part of the objection

seems to him to be a weak and ineffectual argument: the suffering man would find little consolation in such theodicy (2007, 73). He thinks the same is true of moral evil. The human spirit is so formed that it immediately feels a sense of approval or disapproval at the appearance of certain characters, inclinations or actions: it approves of those which ensure the peace and security of human society and disapproves of those which produce disorder. No theodicy argument should prevail over these natural feelings. The second part of the objection seems difficult to refute only by those who admit that the Divine is the proximate cause of human actions: if the Divine has this status, and if human actions are criminal, then the attempt to claim that it is not nevertheless the author of sin runs into unresolvable difficulties. But this is only the case if philosophy ventures boldly to solve these sublime mysteries that are beyond its powers. But if it returns with modesty from this land so full of obscurities and perplexities to its authentic domain which is the examination of ordinary life and experience it will have plenty to explore, but without wandering into an “boundless an ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction” (2007, 75).

However, here Hume’s argument on this topic stops short without making more categorical statements about how he intends to explain or salvage the notion of responsibility. Consequently, it is natural to inquire as to what his thesis on this topic would be, or at the very least, how his argument would function in this particular instance. I believe that the answer to this question can be roughly stated as follows: in the context of our everyday experience, the concept of freedom is clear enough if we understand it in the sense of spontaneity. We are free if we act according to our will, without external constraints, if we do not act determined by external forces that are imposed on us (that chain us). This freedom is not only compatible with, but even presupposes, determinations of our will that come from our character, inclinations and motives. This means that the freedom that is exercised is *our* freedom and that we act in virtue of enduring principles that are *our own*. And, this is the only reason why we can be held responsible and accountable for those actions.

And, indeed, his theory of freedom as spontaneity is more coherent, when explained in this way, than those supported by Leibniz and Spinoza, who were compelled to find a way to combine their robust notion of necessity, originating in the idea of God’s providence, with a type of freedom for man that would explain the origin of our error and sins.

But if someone would object: are we really the ones who act determined by motives, inclinations, or character traits that are at least partly beyond our control? Does not the nature within us represent the fundamental principle from which these actions are generated (just as Divinity was for Malebranche)? In my estimation, Hume’s response to this objection would be that by posing this question, we demonstrate once again that we are

victims of the illusion that there is a clear distinction between the natural necessity based on the principle of causality and the necessity specific to human actions. But this distinction is not justified. Moreover, Hume would tell us, we would thereby demonstrate that we are basically still thinking of freedom in the mistaken paradigm of indifference: we are still looking for that moment of indifference when someone (us, nature, the Divine) has acted without any determination of his will. However, to be fair to Hume we should admit that this sense ascribed to freedom should be analysed to see if it is not itself problematic or at least less intelligible than the other. And, indeed, I think that in trying to conceive of what an exercise of will undetermined by anything would mean, not even implying an inclination or preference for one of the countless possible courses of action, we would run into considerable difficulties. A will that is supposed to be absolutely free and undetermined by anything would either act completely at random or would be paralysed, as evidenced by the anecdote of Buridan's donkey. Absolute freedom of will would coincide with absolute lack of freedom. And the mechanistic metaphor used by so many authors, according to which free is he who moves himself, or who has the principle of movement in himself, is even less intelligible because it only assumes what it was meant to demonstrate. And as a proof, if we were to ask further "And in what particular way does it move itself? According to what forces? Where do they spring from?", we would notice that the question is reframed and the apparent clarity of the answer disappears as if by magic.

Thus, Hume counsels us to refrain from exploring the metaphysical realm of sublime absurdities and to return to the more tangible realm of ordinary life, where the notions of will, freedom, and responsibility are more readily comprehensible. This is a kind of appeal to the naturalisation of philosophy, made in advance of its time, which advises us to accept that there is no insurmountable gulf between the course of nature and the workings of our mind, but rather a natural continuity.

Conclusions

The argument presented in this paper enabled us to gain at least a partial insight into the profound nature of human freedom as it was revealed in the debate between two main interpretations of this concept. The first concept is based on the assumption that freedom can be defined as indifference, meaning the absence of any external influence on the will. The second thesis posits that freedom can be more effectively explained in terms of spontaneity. This concept encompasses a capacity for choice that is compatible with the various influences determined by our desires, motives, character, and even our nature.

This distinction originated in the controversies between Christian medieval thinkers who were focusing on explaining how God's providence and grace could coexist with human moral life and how we can explain the problem of evil. Yet, the concept acquired even greater relevance in the ethical theories of modern philosophers, who changed the focus of philosophical discourse from the metaphysical concerns specific to the Cartesian thought to the moral and political perspective which was characteristic for the philosophy of the Enlightenment. And, I assumed the methodological presupposition that the transition in question can be traced by investigating some subtle transformations in the understanding of the concept of freedom, from the interpretation based on indifference to the interpretation based on spontaneity.

My analysis started with the presentation of Descartes's conception which is a *robust* version of the theory of freedom as indifference. In Descartes's view, human will is infinite and free from any kind of external determination, having the ability to choose even that which exceeds the realm of the intellect's clear and distinct perceptions, which also explains the possibility of errors and sins. However, he encountered considerable challenges when attempting to elucidate the relationship between the mind and body and to reconcile the tension between volition and intellect with the constraints of human knowledge and moral conduct.

Next, I referred to the theory of freedom provided by Malebranche in order to address the problems of Cartesianism. I argued that his interpretation is a *thin* version of the theory of indifference, which significantly reduces the scope of human freedom, allowing only for a power of the will to consent or to suspend the consent in relation to the inclinations toward the order and the good, which are predetermined in us by God.

The argument was further developed with the presentation of the relevant contributions regarding this topic provided by two other prominent rationalist thinkers, Spinoza and Leibniz. They explicitly rejected the interpretation of freedom as indifference, arguing for different versions of the theory of spontaneity, which they considered to be more compatible with the thesis of God's providence. However, as the scope of human liberty was further reduced, they encountered even more difficulties in their attempts to explain the problem of moral evil and common notions such as vice and virtue.

Finally, I presented Hume's revision of the theory of spontaneity, which is based on his conception that reason plays no significant role in our moral life. This is because reason is only the "slave of the passions" and, therefore, is incapable of originating our choices and inclinations. Nevertheless, I argued that his view on spontaneity is more coherent than those supported by Spinoza and Leibniz. The reason for this is that it is founded on a more unitary conception of human freedom and its relation with the type of

necessity existing in nature. In his view, the natural necessity is analogous to and in harmony with the influences exerted on the will by motives, desires and character.

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