

# Human Free Will in Anselm and Descartes

Sophie Berman  
St. Francis College

*Freedom is a central theme in Descartes's philosophy, where it is linked to the theme of the infinite: it is through the freedom of the will, experienced as unlimited, that the human understands itself to bear the "image and likeness" of the infinite God. In God the will is logically prior to the intellect, although both are inseparable in the unity of the divine nature; the infinite, properly understood, is will, since its essence is pure power. The human will mirrors this power, transcendent to the world. The Cartesian "thing that thinks," the rational being, is fundamentally the thing that is free.*

*These views align Descartes with a voluntarist philosophical tradition emphasizing the will in both the human and the divine. Anselm is a major figure in this tradition. Undoubtedly the similarity between Anselm and Descartes is easily masked by the difference of context: Anselm's *De libertate arbitrii* deals with the freedom of the will in connection with the question of sin, while Descartes's Fourth Meditation brings up the notion of free will within the setting of an analysis of error. Descartes's philosophical project, tied to epistemological exigencies, is not the Anselmian project of "faith seeking understanding." Yet Anselm and Descartes reveal a common metaphysical intuition in discerning an indivisible and inalienable freedom - imaging the divine creativeness - at the heart of created rational nature. The aim of the present paper is to explain this commonality.*

## Introduction

Freedom is a central theme in Descartes's philosophy, where it is linked to the theme of the infinite: it is through the freedom of the will, experienced as unlimited, that the human understands itself to bear the "image and likeness" of the infinite God. In God the will is logically prior to the intellect, although both are inseparable in the unity of the divine nature; the infinite, properly understood, is will, since its essence is pure *power*. The human will mirrors this power, transcendent to the world. The Cartesian "thing that thinks," the rational being, is fundamentally the thing that is free.

These views align Descartes with a voluntarist philosophical tradition emphasizing the will in both the human and the divine. Anselm is a major figure in this tradition. Undoubtedly the similarity between Anselm and Descartes is easily masked by the difference of context: Anselm's *De libertate arbitrii* deals with the freedom of the will in connection with the question of *sin*, while Descartes's Fourth Meditation brings up the notion of free will within the setting of an analysis of *error*. Descartes's philosophical project, tied to epistemological exigencies, is not the Anselmian project of "faith seeking understanding." Yet Anselm and Descartes reveal a common metaphysical intuition in discerning an indivisible and inalienable freedom - imaging the divine creativeness - at the heart of created rational nature. The aim of the present paper is to explain this commonality.

It is appropriate to start by clarifying the respective contexts of the two doctrines. In his Preface to the three treatises *De veritate*, *De libertate arbitrii*, and *De casu diaboli*, Anselm indicates that these dialogues "pertain to the study of Sacred Scripture."<sup>1</sup> Sacred Scripture teaches us how to read our human history in terms of the divine plan which begins with creation and is fulfilled with salvation. Everything that exists, or has being, comes from God: "What do you have that you have not received?" Paul asks the Corinthians, in the quote opening the first chapter of *De casu diaboli*.<sup>2</sup> And as coming from God, everything that exists is good. This certainly applies to free will, given by God to all rational beings.<sup>3</sup> How is it, then, that there is sin? One might surmise that free will is overwhelmed by a superior power that enslaves it. Do we not read in the gospel of John (quoted twice in *De libertate arbitrii*<sup>4</sup>) that "he who commits sin, is the slave of sin"? God's grace alone can free the sinner from this enslavement. But if the sinner is the slave of sin, and can only be freed by divine grace, how can he or she still be free? Elucidating the meaning of Sacred Scripture requires an analysis of free will supporting at once the sinner's accountability (no sin is ever *necessary*) and the divine goodness (nothing evil ever comes from God).

Descartes's purpose is not to elucidate the meaning of Sacred Scripture, but to lay the edifice of science on a solid metaphysical foundation. By the end of Meditation III, he has established the two pillars of his metaphysics: the first is subjectivity and the second is God's truthfulness or non-deceptiveness.<sup>5</sup> Reason is now certain of itself, and - through God - certain of the *truth* of what it discovers when it functions properly. Clear and distinct ideas - the tools of reason - may confidently be used: God guarantees their reliability. But if it is impossible for God to deceive me, how can I explain the fact that I commit errors? Meditation IV removes this difficulty, by providing an explanation of error which exonerates God from my mistakes and hence confirms the reliability of reason. It is within this context that the analysis of human free will appears in Descartes's *Meditations*. The focus here is not right action, but the possibility of knowledge. Yet a close examination of the two doctrines of the will can bring to light some surprising convergences.

## I.

Let us turn to the doctrine outlined in Anselm's *De libertate arbitrii*. Although sin can only be found in a being that possesses free will, the definition of free will does not include the power of sinning. If it did we would have to deny not only the angelic but even the divine freedom, "which it is impious to say."<sup>6</sup> The capacity to sin, when added to the will, *diminishes* freedom; the *lack* of such capacity, on the contrary, augments it - so that nothing is freer than a will that *cannot* fall from rectitude into sin. Thus for Anselm free will, in its essence, is linked not to sin, but to rectitude; that is why it exists eminently in God, who is absolute rectitude, truth, and goodness. Between the free

---

<sup>1</sup> Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works, edited with an Introduction by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 151. All quotes from Anselm refer to this edition, hereinafter abbreviated as Anselm.

<sup>2</sup> Anselm, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> "No will in so far as it exists is evil but is good because it is the work of God." Anselm, *De casu diaboli* 19, p. 221. For all subsequent quotes from Anselm, the first number refers to the chapter, the second one to the page.

<sup>4</sup> 2,177 and 10, 188.

<sup>5</sup> "First" and "secondly" refer to the order of discovery, which is reverse to the order of being.

<sup>6</sup> 1, 176.

will of human beings and the free will of God, lies all the distance separating human beings from God; yet "the definition of freedom expressed by the word ought to be the same."<sup>7</sup>

Freedom was given by God to the rational nature, together with rectitude of the will, solely in order that it may *retain* this rectitude, and retain it *for its own sake*, i.e. for the sake of justice. "The liberty of will is the capacity for preserving rectitude of the will for the sake of rectitude itself."<sup>8</sup> "Free judgment" is a judgment capable of doing just that. Since "this power of preserving the rectitude of will is always in a rational nature,"<sup>9</sup> rectitude cannot be taken away *unless one wills it*. This is a very bold thesis, central to Anselm's philosophy of the human: no one is deprived of rectitude of will except by his own will. Although a man can be tied up or killed against his will, he cannot *will* against his will. Unlike being tied up or killed against one's will, *willing* against one's will (in other words: being forced to choose) would mean the very annihilation of the will. It is an absolute impossibility: "every willing person wills his own willing."<sup>10</sup> Thus no alien power - neither devil nor God - can take rectitude away from a will that wills to keep it: "no one is deprived of rectitude of will except by his own will,"<sup>11</sup> no one unwillingly abandons rectitude of the will. "There is nothing freer than a right will since no alien power can take away its rectitude."<sup>12</sup>

But, asks the student, how about someone who lies unwillingly when he is forced into a situation where the alternative is to lie or to be killed? In such a situation, the teacher replies, it is not *necessary* for the person to lie: the only thing that is necessary is that the person choose one *or* the other. Thus, the person *could* not lie and be killed. If he abandons the rectitude of will by lying for the sake of his life, he does so willingly. Common language here (as is often the case) tends to obscure the truth.<sup>13</sup> What we can do only *with difficulty* (e.g. accepting to be killed in order to avoid lying), we say that we *cannot* do; and what we can give up only *with difficulty* (e.g. choosing to lie in order to avoid being killed), we say that we do it *necessarily*. However, there is no necessity in this case: the man who lies to save his life "is improperly said to lie against his will, because he willingly lies, and he is improperly said to *will* to lie against his will, because he wills it precisely by willing. For just as when he lies he wills himself to lie, so when he wills to lie, he wills that willing."<sup>14</sup> Thus "free will is that which another power cannot overcome without its assent."<sup>15</sup> In the possession of this sovereign power resides the specificity of the human among all creatures: unlike a horse who is "naturally, always and of necessity"<sup>16</sup> the slave of its bodily appetite, the human being is not *necessarily* the slave of sin. It is not that the will cannot be conquered: it is that the will can never be conquered *without its own consent*. Or, to say the same thing otherwise, "the

---

<sup>7</sup> 1, 176.

<sup>8</sup> 3, 179.

<sup>9</sup> 4, 181.

<sup>10</sup> 5, 181.

<sup>11</sup> 5, 181.

<sup>12</sup> 9, 187.

<sup>13</sup> "Many things in common parlance are said improperly, but when we are trying to get to the bottom of the truth we must as far as possible and as the argument requires set aside the distracting improprieties." De casu diaboli 12, 212. Descartes shares with Anselm this suspicion of common language, viewed as obstacle on the way to truth.

<sup>14</sup> 5, 182. Emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> 5, 183.

<sup>16</sup> 5, 183.

will can only be conquered *by itself*."<sup>17</sup> When we sin, that is, when we will what we ought not, we will our willing. The powerlessness that we assign to our will when we experience violent temptation is a question of *difficulty*, not of *impossibility*. The former can never increase to the point that it passes over into the latter; in this non-annullable distance between difficulty and impossibility lies the irreducible power of the human will, stronger than the strongest temptations.

Even when the will *succumbs* to temptation, it remains stronger than temptation. How, the student asks, can this be? When I will less strongly than I ought because of temptation, is temptation not stronger than my will? No, it is not, the teacher replies. Just as the word "sight" can refer either to the *instrument* we have for seeing, or to the *use* of this instrument, i.e. vision, the word "will" can refer either to the *instrument* of willing that is in the soul, or to the *use* of this instrument. And just as we possess undiminished the instrument of seeing even when we do not see, the instrument of willing is always and unchangeably in our soul, even when we do not will. The *strength* of willing is found in the instrument, and is inalienable; but this inalienable strength is used sometimes more and sometimes less. "When a man, under the assault of temptation, abandons the rectitude of will that he has, he is not drawn away from it by any alien force, but he turns himself to that which he more strongly wills."<sup>18</sup>

God himself, although he is the creator of all things and as such "can reduce to nothing the whole substance that he made from nothing,"<sup>19</sup> cannot remove rectitude from a will that wills to preserve it. The rectitude of will is the rectitude thanks to which the will is called "just," i.e. the rectitude which is preserved for its own sake. But to preserve the rectitude of will for its own sake is to do what one ought, and this is none other than to will what God wants one to will. Should God remove this rectitude of will, he would of course do so willingly; thus he would *not* want the one from whom he would remove this rectitude to will what he wants him to will, which is manifestly absurd. Anselm's logic is impeccable, but this is not just a matter of logic. It is a matter of theology: God cannot do something which would entail that he ceases to be God, and this is what would happen under the present supposition. Thus, "nothing is more impossible than that God should take away the rectitude of will."<sup>20</sup>

"The rational nature always has free will because it always has the power of preserving rectitude of will for the sake of rectitude itself."<sup>21</sup> Indeed this power *defines* free will. When the will abandons its rectitude it becomes "the slave of sin," incapable of recovering rectitude by its own power - just as it is incapable of giving rectitude to itself in the first place. No will, when it abandons the rectitude it has received, can regain it unless God restores it. This restoration, Anselm comments, is a greater miracle than the restoration of life to a dead man; that is why those to whom the rectitude of will has been given "ought to battle ceaselessly to preserve it always."<sup>22</sup> But even

---

<sup>17</sup> 5, 183. Emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> 7, 186.

<sup>19</sup> 8, 186.

<sup>20</sup> 8, 187.

<sup>21</sup> 10, 188.

<sup>22</sup> 10, 189.

the slavery that results from sin does not take away freedom of will. Even when there is no rectitude to preserve (because the will has abandoned it by its own willing), it remains inherent in the nature of the will that it is free to preserve it if it has it. Hence when the will does not have rectitude, "it is without contradiction both slave and free."<sup>23</sup> This statement does not establish an equivalency between slavery and freedom in human nature: the fact that we are rightly called "free" even when we do *not* have rectitude does not entail that we should be called "slaves" even when we *do* have it. Our powerlessness to restore rectitude to our own will only exists when we abandon this rectitude, as a result of this abandonment; freedom, however, is consubstantial to the will. Even when the sun is absent, we have in us the sight whereby we see it when it is present; even when the rectitude of will is lacking, we have in us "the aptitude to understand and will whereby we can preserve it for its own sake when we have it."<sup>24</sup> "The power of preserving the rectitude of will for its own sake is a perfect definition of free will,"<sup>25</sup> Anselm insists. Where there is a *reason* capable of knowing rectitude and a will capable of holding on to it, there is such power.

## II.

Descartes agrees with Anselm in viewing the will as by definition free,<sup>26</sup> which means that it cannot be forced by any external power to choose what it does not want. That we possess such freedom of choice, he says, "is so evident that it must be counted among the first and most common notions that are innate in us."<sup>27</sup> Descartes seems, however, to diverge from Anselm in a major way by accepting the idea of a "liberty of indifference," where the *content* of what is chosen is irrelevant to the definition of freedom. In this definition, freedom is understood as a strictly neutral capacity to affirm or to deny, to bear or to suspend judgment. This capacity enables us to pick arbitrarily among things to which we are indifferent; it also enables us to pursue or to avoid a good, to give or to withhold our assent to a truth: "It is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good, or from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing."<sup>28</sup>

Anselm would certainly not think that turning away deliberately from the truth constitutes in any way a demonstration of our freedom. But Descartes himself notes in the same letter to Mesland quoted above that the freedom by which we determine ourselves to things to which we are indifferent "is the lowest degree of freedom."<sup>29</sup> What, then, is freedom in the highest degree, freedom in the perfection of its nature? It is the freedom whereby we adhere to that regarding which

---

<sup>23</sup> 11, 189.

<sup>24</sup> 12, 190.

<sup>25</sup> 13, 191.

<sup>26</sup> Replies to the Third Set of Objections, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (and Anthony Kenny for vol. 3), 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2:134. All quotes from Descartes refer to this edition, hereinafter abbreviated as Descartes.

<sup>27</sup> *Principles of Philosophy* I, 39; Descartes 1:205-6.

<sup>28</sup> Letter to Mesland, 9 February 1645; Descartes 2:245.

<sup>29</sup> Descartes 2:245.

we *cannot* be "indifferent," viz., the truth, the object of Descartes's pursuit in the *Meditations*. "In order to be free," he writes in Meditation IV, "there is no need for me to be inclined both ways; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction, - either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth or goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thoughts - the freer is my choice. Neither divine grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary, they increase and strengthen it." In this perspective, "the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom; it is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation. For if I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgement or choice; in that case, although I should be wholly free, it would be impossible for me ever to be in a state of indifference."<sup>30</sup> Along this line of thinking, Descartes would countersign Anselm's statement that "a will that *cannot* fall from rectitude into sin is more free than one that *can* desert it."<sup>31</sup>

The occurrence of error is a paradox in view of the fact that God cannot be a deceiver. Clear and distinct ideas are the tools that reason possesses for knowing. If God could deceive me *even when I am thinking through clear and distinct ideas*, I would be irremediably deprived of any criterion for recognizing when I am going astray; reason would be hopelessly unreliable. Obviously, intending me to be deceived in this way would denote, in God, a defect incompatible with infinity. It would mean, in fact, that God is not God - just as God would not be God, for Anselm, if he could take away the rectitude of will. The impossibility for God not to be God is, in both philosophers, the foundation of the doctrine of free will. Descartes stresses in Meditation IV that our faculty of judgment was given to us by God and that God cannot wish to deceive us; "everything that is in me comes from God, and he did not endow me with a faculty for making mistakes."<sup>32</sup> God did not create me as a rational being with a reason that does not work. In so far as I am God's creation, "there is nothing in me to enable me to go wrong or lead me astray."<sup>33</sup> If I commit errors, it is not in so far as I have being, but rather in so far as "I participate in nothingness or non-being."<sup>34</sup> The possibility of error hinges on the difference in scope between the two faculties - both God-given, both good - involved in the act of knowing. The will or freedom of choice (enabling me to bear judgments) is infinite, whereas the understanding (enabling me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgments) is finite; thus I can err by using my will to assert beyond the limits of what my understanding perceives clearly and distinctly. This constitutes an incorrect use of my free will, for which God is not responsible.

But the same infinite will that makes it possible for me to commit errors also enables me to avoid committing them: if I am careful always to restrain my will within the limits of my understanding, I am sure that I will never go wrong (even though, because of the finitude of my understanding, I cannot know everything). This is nothing else than *using my reason* in the manner

---

<sup>30</sup> Descartes 2:40.

<sup>31</sup> Anselm 1, 176. Emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> Descartes 2:38.

<sup>33</sup> Descartes 2:38.

<sup>34</sup> Descartes 2:38.

in which it is meant to be used. It is easy to dismiss as "naive" Descartes's conviction that it is possible to avoid error. Can we really *not err*? Yes, in the same way that for Anselm we can really *not sin*: a will that wills the truth cannot be diverted from the truth by any alien power. It is important to stress that for Descartes, knowledge does not merely reside in the clear and distinct perception: it is an act of will whereby I *assent* to the clear and distinct perception, *judge* that it is true. Since everything that can be the object of such a perception is - along with everything that exists - the effect of God's creative will, when I give my assent to a clear and distinct idea I am willing that which God has willed into being. Knowledge is an assent to creation; it is, like preserving the rectitude of the will for its own sake in Anselm, willing what God wants.<sup>35</sup>

With a metaphysical boldness that matches that of Anselm, Descartes asserts that the freedom of the will is infinite. He does so both by an appeal to immediate experience (I experience my free will to be "not restricted in any way"<sup>36</sup>), and by a reasoning which involves the mediation of God: when I conceive that a faculty of mine can exist as greater, and even infinite, in the infinite being, this makes me aware of my limitation; but when I *cannot* conceive that a faculty of mine can exist as greater, *even* in the infinite being, I understand myself to be the *image* of the infinite being in the respect of that faculty. The logical conclusion: I understand my free will to be infinite. Undoubtedly God's will, unlike mine, is accompanied by infinite knowledge and power, and applies to an immeasurable number of things; but considered as pure will, "in the essential and strict sense," "it does not seem any greater than mine."<sup>37</sup> Descartes is not here equating the human mind with God, any more than Anselm when he says that the definition of free will "is common to every rational nature."<sup>38</sup> For Descartes as for Anselm, the divine freedom is "from itself," while human freedom is "received from another."<sup>39</sup> I am not the infinite being, Descartes stresses, but a finite being who does not possess *anything* that it has not been *given*. Nevertheless, it is impossible for human freedom to be anything less than infinite.

The doctrine of freedom does not appear suddenly in Meditation IV as a means to explain error: it is rooted in the "I am, I exist" of Meditation II, and even further upstream, in the methodical doubt from which "I am, I exist" emerges, and in the project of the search for truth which justifies the methodical doubt. At the moment when the mind, supposing the falsity of all its objects of thought, focuses on its pure activity of thinking, it immediately takes hold of *itself* - precisely as a "self," an "I" capable of self-affirmation; the very definition of the mind, or thinking substance, is self-assertiveness or freedom. It appears, therefore, that there are *two levels* of the will for

---

<sup>35</sup> This assent to creation is also present when I decide to suspend judgment in the absence of a clear and distinct idea; although I am not, in that case, positively acquiring knowledge, I am actively rejecting falsehood and thereby consenting to being, willing what God wants. Even before clear and distinct ideas can be grounded in God's truthfulness, before I even know whether there is a God, I am already (still unbeknownst to me) aligning my will with God's will when I choose to suppose that all my ideas are false rather than risk becoming ensnared by a possible "evil genius" bent on deception. However formidable this "alien power" may be, it is no match for a will that wills the truth.

<sup>36</sup> Descartes 2:39.

<sup>37</sup> Descartes 2:40.

<sup>38</sup> Anselm, 14, 192.

<sup>39</sup> Anselm, 14, 192.

Descartes, as there are - albeit in a different way - two levels of the will, "willing its own willing," for Anselm. Deeper than the level of the will that is the source of our particular judgments is the level of the "I" which aspires to truth and *uses* in its quest both the will and the understanding. It is this very aspiration which comes into play in our rush to affirm even in the absence of a clear and distinct idea; it is this same aspiration which can make us decide to refrain from rushing to judgment. The human mind does not only *have* a will; it *is* a will, like the divine mind. This means that it posits itself *from within*. In other words, freedom is interiority. As such, it is infinite. It is not contradictory to think of the mind as finite in its power to understand, to comprehend, or to impact on external things. But to think of the freedom of the mind, or will, as possessing *in itself* degrees or limitations, would be to introduce degrees or limitations into the very essence of selfhood - a totally absurd proposition. As Descartes puts it in the Synopsis of the *Meditations*: "We cannot conceive of half of a mind."<sup>40</sup> The indivisibility of the thinking thing does not entail the infinity of the understanding; but it does entail the infinity of the will.

It is *as free will*, affirming itself from the inside, that the thinking substance distinguishes itself from, and is transcendent to, the extended substance - the latter being made up of parts exterior to parts, pushing each other around. Freedom cannot be explained away in terms of nature. The irreducibility of free will to what is *not* itself - commonly underlined, although in different terms, by Descartes and Anselm - is the irreducibility of the human to the world of necessity (of which the horse, to go back to Anselm's example, is a part). Whatever limitations human beings may be caught in, humanity itself admits of no limitations. Either humanity is there, or it is not. If it is there, then it is there entirely, without limitations or degrees. Descartes is mindful of the limitations which accompany the exercise of freedom; but whatever constraints human beings may be caught in, narrowing down the margin within which their freedom can operate, this margin is never null (let us recall here Anselm's claim that the strongest temptation, when one's very life is at stake, does not reduce the power of the will by one iota). And if it is not null, it is infinite. This Cartesian view, the ethical implications of which cannot be underestimated, resonates with Anselm's affirmation of a freedom that can never be divided or diminished.

Descartes's conception of subjectivity does not end with the Cogito. For the self-asserting subject knows that it does not give itself its own being; it knows that the necessary connection between its thinking and its existing does not entail the necessity of its existence. Thus it discovers within itself the idea of the infinite, which is the idea of God, as the idea of that which is wholly *other* than itself. Since I have the idea of the infinite, the infinite substance really exists outside of my idea. It is the cause of my idea of the infinite, and of my very being as a thinking thing that thinks the infinite. The mind's relationship with God - an asymmetrical relationship, in which God gives and the mind receives - is built into the mind's very nature, making it what it is: infinite, indivisible, inalienable freedom, "image and likeness"<sup>41</sup> of the Creator. No knowledge of the world can be achieved by the mind unless and until it acknowledges its dependency on God - since knowledge is precisely an act by which the human mind places itself in conformity with God's will

---

<sup>40</sup> Descartes 2:9.

<sup>41</sup> Descartes 2:40.



manifested in creation. For Descartes as for Anselm, human freedom is *nothing* apart from the divine freedom that creates it and, in the act of creating it, orders it for the truth.

### III.

When the names of Anselm and Descartes are brought together, it is usually in connection with the so-called "ontological argument" for God's existence. But if the similarity between the argument of the *Proslogion* and that of the Fifth Meditation expresses - as indeed it does - a metaphysical kinship far deeper than a superficial analogy of form, this kinship must also reveal itself in other aspects of the two philosophers' respective doctrines. This is eminently the case with regard to human free will. In both Descartes and Anselm we find: (a) the affirmation of an innate orientation of human rationality toward truth, resulting from the fact that it is created by God; (b) a conception of free will allowing sin in one case, error in the other, to be explained by human freedom in such a manner that nothing is taken away from its fundamental *goodness*, also resulting from the fact that it is created by God. The position of such a will constitutes the core of both philosophical anthropologies.