

Free Choice of the Will in Part IV Of A Dialogue Concerning Heresies

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The impressive stream of works by Thomas More in certain areas of doctrinal controversy from the mid-1520s until the end of his life testify to his courageous but prudent readiness to meet the challenges presented by Luther and Lutheranism. From his vantage point as the holder of various positions of authority there were certain issues that stirred his conscience to compose firm but thoughtful responses. One should not overlook the direct challenge to him issued by Cuthbert Tunstall in March 1528:

Because you, dearest brother, can excell [sic] Demosthenes himself in our vernacular as well as in Latin, and are accustomed to being a most keen defender of the Catholic truth on all occasions of conflict, you could not spend your leisure hours more profitably, if you can snatch any away from your official duties, than by publishing something in our language that may expose to simple and unlearned men the cunning malice of heretics, and so make them better prepared against these impious subverters of the church.¹

A rapid succession of works of a controversial nature thereafter flow from More's pen, including *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and *Supplication of Souls* in 1529, *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (in three books, 1532), *A Letter Impugning the Erroneous Writings of John Frith* (1533), five more books of the *Confutation* (also in 1533), *The Apology of Sir Thomas More, Knight* (1533), the *Debellation of Salem and Bizance* (1533), and *The Answer to a Poisoned Book which a Nameless Heretic Hath Called the Supper of the Lord* (1533). In addition, there are works of a spiritual nature from this period, written, I suspect, not only for others but as a way to sustain More's own devotion in a time often marred by great desolation.

This paper will consider some of More's comments in Part IV of the *Dialogue* on the issue of freedom of the will. To appreciate the remarks found there it is helpful to consider the context of More's effort to contest the Lutheran position. Doing so requires some consideration of his views on the position of Luther as well as his reliance on the accounts of free choice of the will offered by Augustine and other medieval authors that were regarded as sound and orthodox Christian views. This paper aims to examine the content and style of More's reliance on the doctrine of free choice of the will as part of his larger project in the *Dialogue*.

¹ Quoted in Alistair Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 144, from *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), no. 160, p. 387/19-26: "Et quia tu, frater charissime, in lingua nostra vernacula, sicut etiam in Latina, Demosthenem quendam praestare potes, et Catholice veritatis assertor acerrimus in omni congressu esse soles, melius subsicuas horas, si quas tuis occupationibus suffurari potes, collocare nunquam poteris, quam in nostrate lingua aliqua edas, que simplicibus et ideotis hominibus subdolum hereticorum malignitatem aperiant, ac contra tam impios Ecclesie supplantatores reddant eos instructiores."

In the *Dialogue*² we find catalogued all sorts of errors, mistakes, and even malice that More found among those inclined to a Protestant stance. In addition to sounding warnings about various imminent dangers in these matters, he also reflected on various theoretical questions at the intersection between morality and religion, between doctrine and spirituality. It is clearly his conviction that human failure and human imperfection are no reason for despair, for there always remain the efficacious assistance of divine grace and the genuine possibility of real freedom in the human will. More presses this point throughout the *Dialogue*, for he is mindful that the Lutheran position has its own stands on these questions and thus that he needs in some way to address those stands. In many passages of the *Dialogue* the point is made by the steady diet of encouragement that More gives to the young messenger who is his dialogic partner in this volume. In some passages, such as IV.10, there is explicit discussion of the theme of freedom of will that shows how much More wants to bring to bear in his arguments from the Catholic tradition of Augustine and Aquinas. He never shies away from a point that he may well have carried with him from the time of his lectures on Augustine's *City of God*, namely, that the Church contains both saints and sinners. Nor does he miss an opportunity to correct the contradictions that he finds in the relatively pessimistic Lutheran understanding of the depravity of the human will. He labors to recapitulate a typically Catholic stance about the possibilities of our nature to receive the corrections and the counsels of the Holy Spirit, about the need to be responsive to the invitations of grace, and about the distinctive contributions of grace and free choice in personal reform of life.

In More's most explicit discussion on free choice of the will within the *Dialogue*, namely, the passage at IV.10, he makes the point that there is a curious contradiction at the heart of the Lutheran position on the depravity of the will—a contradiction that renders this position completely untenable. There he notes that an excessive stress on divine predestination paradoxically entails the denial of freedom, which would in turn entail the denial of responsibility for the very acts that manifest the depravity of which Luther complains. What one ought to maintain instead, according to More, is that God's providential plan to bring human beings to salvation includes a genuine role for freedom of choice without denying the efficacy of divine grace. But holding this position implies a need to correct the Lutheran notion of the servility of the human will. A proper explanation must, More explains, preserve a respect for the necessity of assistance by divine grace and simultaneously leave a place for genuine freedom of choice in order to preserve human accountability for salvation or damnation.

More's actual words are as strong and vigorous here as at any place else in the *Dialogue*. They are no less perceptive for being so forceful. It will be helpful to work our way carefully through the lines of this short chapter:

“Surely, as I say, this world is either, as Saint John puts it, *totus positus in maligno*, ‘all set in malice’ [1 Jn 5:19], that we are so prone to take knowingly so wrong a way, or else it is in an amazing blindness, if we neither can tell from the wicked behavior of the persons that their sect is wicked nor can tell from their doctrine that their sect must make their persons wicked, their heresies being such as you have heard. (427)

The opening gambit that More uses here involves a dichotomy: either complete moral depravity as the human condition or incredible ignorance about the consequences of heresy in religion. This sentence thus acknowledges the logical possibility that there could perhaps be complete depravity

² Quotations from Thomas More's *Dialogue concerning Heresies* will be taken from the following edition: Saint Thomas More, *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, rendered in Modern English by Mary Gottschalk (New York NY: Scepter, 2006).

(*totus positus in maligno*). The Latin words are a reference to 1 John 5:19, which was taken by Lutherans to suggest that the human is so corrupt that human beings are simply unable ever to choose aright by their own power. Luther's translation of that verse emphasizes the bondage of the will³ where it renders this verse as follows: *Wir wissen, daß wir von Gott sind, und die ganze Welt liegt im Argen* ("We know that we belong to God, and [that] the whole world lies in chains"). But assessing the merits of this interpretation of scripture much depends on whether we take the previous verses in that epistle that are the context of this phrase to be a factual description of our ontological condition or, rather, an exhortation to Christian virtue that actually presumes the reality of freedom of the will. The scriptural passage in question reads:

"We know that anyone who has been begotten by God does not sin because the begotten Son of God protects him, and the Evil One does not touch him. We know that we belong to God, but the whole world lies in the power of the Evil One [*et mundus totus maligno positus est*]. We know, too, that the Son of God has come, and has given us the power to know the true God. We are in the true God, as we are in his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the true God, this is eternal life. Children, be on your guard against false gods." (1 John 5:18-21, Jerusalem Bible translation)

The issue is not just the proper translation of verse 19, which the Jerusalem Bible here renders as "the whole world lies in the power of the Evil One," but the interpretation of the whole passage, taken in context. For Luther's interpretation to be correct, this entire passage would need to be descriptive of some astounding change that takes place within the human constitution with the communication of the gift of faith and the reception of baptism, a change of the sort that we could expect that Christians as the children of God would never again sin despite being depraved. That does not seem to be the case, for Christians do unfortunately succumb to sin after their baptism, despite the graces of the sacrament of penance. Hence it does not seem wise to interpret either the whole passage or that portion of it that More uses to represent the Lutheran position as a description of an ontological change in Christians that makes them unable to sin. Rather, it seems more likely that the passage needs to be regarded as exhortatory for those who do have the power of free choice within their wills—an encouragement to take their faith seriously, to make use of the genuinely efficacious protections that are provided by God's grace against the Evil One, and to remain within Christ's fold by living and choosing rightly. If there were any doubt, the final directive ("be on your guard...") makes clear the passage's exhortatory character.

In the passage under discussion here from the *Dialogue*, More proposes to his conversation partner another alternative. Rather than interpreting the Latin words *totus positus in maligno* as if they implied a total depravity, such that all human beings are completely prone to take a wrong course of action knowingly, we can take them as a description of a world in which the effects of the Fall are enormous but something short of complete depravity. This scenario is implied in the second half of the dichotomy: there is a general ignorance that prevails about the pernicious effect of Lutheran teaching and practice. It has been More's intention to convince the messenger of this possibility throughout the *Dialogue*. More considers this possibility when he writes: "or else it [the world] is in an amazing blindness, if we neither can tell from the wicked behavior of the persons that their sect is wicked nor can tell from their doctrine that their sect must make their persons

³ Especially important for assessing Luther's views on this topic is his book *The Bondage of the Will*. See *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of De Servo Arbitrio (1525): Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam* by J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston (London: J. Clarke, 1957). For some of the political implications of his views on this subject, see *Luther: Selected Political Writings*, edited and with an introduction by J.M. Porter (Philadelphia PA: Fortress, 1974), esp. pp. 4-21.

wicked, their heresies being such as you have heard.” In the preceding portion of Book IV, More had in fact been considering the incongruity between Martin Luther’s reputation and his behavior when commenting on Luther’s marriage to Katherina Bora:

[I]s it not...an astonishing things to see...a lewd friar be so bold and so shameless as to marry a nun and stick by this, and still be taken for a Christian man, and, moreover, for a man fit to be the beginner of a sect, whom any honorable man should deign to follow? (426-27)

Admittedly, neither of the choices in this dichotomy is attractive, for (1) utter depravity would remove responsibility by reason of our irresistible proneness to wrongdoing, and yet (2) it is astounding that we cannot recognize blatant wickedness when we see it. A realistic assessment of the situation, however, requires that we accept the second option and reject the first. Doing so, More thinks, requires that we expose the error in the Lutheran denial of free choice of the will and that we admit the possibility of such moral blindness that some people would risk denying free choice of the will rather than recognizing the truth about moral culpability. More feels confident in urging a very boldly stated claim:

Whereby anyone who has any faith and any kind of knowledge of Christian belief can quite certainly tell that Luther and all his offspring, with all those who promote and propagate his sect, are very agents of the devil and open enemies to the faith of Christ. And not only to the faith and humanity of Christ our Savior, but also against the Holy Spirit and the Father himself, and utterly against all goodness of the Godhead, in that they wretchedly lay all the weight and blame of our sin to the necessity and constraint of God’s ordinance, affirming that we do no sin of ourselves, by any power of our own will, but do it by the compulsion and handiwork of God. And that we do not do the sin ourselves, but that God does the sin in us himself. (427-28)

Such forthright expression of opinion is bracing, but at the very least More cannot be accused of speaking so subtly that his interlocutor might miss the conclusion.

For the purposes of this paper, it is the latter portion of this passage that is of special interest. More is asserting not just that there is need to be critical of the Lutheran position as deleterious to morals but also that the Lutheran position on this subject is philosophically repugnant, for the doctrine of predestination in this form involves a denial that free choice is within the power of the human will and, thus in effect, puts all the responsibility for sin upon God. The position that More himself champions is not that the will is utterly independent of divine causality, but that free choice of the will is compatible with the possibility of real influence upon the will by divine grace. This position, of course, is a long-standing thesis of Catholic authors. Defending the view is not without its theoretical difficulties, and in fact the question has been the source of a perennially busy cottage industry for philosophers and theologians.

Interestingly, More does not try to offer any metaphysical explanation of just how the interplay of will and grace works. The mystery of that interaction is one that even the likes of Augustine and Aquinas never entirely resolved. It is, rather, the fact that there is some kind of interplay that More wants to defend. He is content in the remainder of the passage to accuse the proponents of the Lutheran position of a “blasphemous heresy” by the way in which they cast a “scurrilous aspersion on the great mastery of God.” In his view, holding this position would give people leave “to follow their foul inclinations, as things, according to their opinion, more truly wrought in them by God than the best dispositions are in good people.” Further, he notes, “it would therefore be in vain for them to resist their sinful desires.” This Lutheran position eviscerates any reason for moral struggle.

In the final portion of IV.10, More displays a similar pattern of argument when he focuses on the implications for Judgment Day. In passing, he notes Luther's repudiation of the idea of Purgatory when he observes that Luther had claimed that the souls of the dead experience a sleep without feeling until the day of final reckoning. But, More observes, this only defers the problem, for the same difficulties of explanation will recur for those who deny free choice of the will:

“And then [on Judgment Day] they that shall be damned shall be damned, he says, for no deserving by their own deeds, but for such evil deeds as God alone forced and coerced them into and wrought in them himself, using them, in all those evil deeds, only as a passive instrument, as a man hews with a hatchet. And that God shall damn all that shall be damned for his own deed only, which he himself shall have done in them; and ultimately only for his pleasure, because it was not his pleasure to choose them as he did his chosen people. Whom they say he chose in such a way, before the beginning of the world, that they can never sin.” (428)

As More sees it, the problem is that an excessively robust doctrine of predestination coupled with a sense of the utter depravity of the human will leads ineluctably to the view that responsibility for sin and even for damnation rests not with human beings but with God. Modern theologians have been at pains to defend Luther from this charge,⁴ but in attempting their defenses, which are beyond the scope of this paper, they do not shy from quoting some of the most difficult passages from Luther, such as the following:

Now you may well be disturbed by the thought that it is difficult to defend the mercy and justice of God when he condemns the undeserving, that is to say, the ungodly who are what they are because they were born in ungodliness and can in no way help being and remaining ungodly and worthy of condemnation but are compelled by a necessity of nature to sin and perish (as Paul says: “We were all children of wrath like the rest” [Eph. 2:3] since they are created so by God himself from seed corrupted by the sin of the one man Adam). But the point really is, in fact, God must be honored and revered as supremely merciful toward those whom he justifies and saves, supremely unworthy as they are, and there must be at least some acknowledgment of his divine wisdom so that he may be believed to be righteous where he seems to us to be unjust. For if his righteousness were such that it could be judged to be righteous by human standards, it would clearly not be divine and would in no way differ from human righteousness. But since he is the one true God and is wholly incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason, it is proper and indeed necessary that his righteousness also should be incomprehensible, as Paul also says where he exclaims, “O the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!” [Rom. 11:33].⁵

Whatever the specific passages that More had in mind,⁶ it is a position such as this that is the source of More's concerns. More himself does not offer a positive metaphysical argument for just how grace and will are to be reconciled. He simply argues the negative case, namely, that it cannot possibly be true that what is our fault should be chalked up to God's decision to make us the way

⁴ See, for instance, Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), esp. pp. 62-66 on the theme “God is not responsible for evil.”

⁵ This is taken from Kolb, pp. 64-65.

⁶ For the study of More's knowledge of Luther's works and his response to Luther, see his *Responsio ad Lutherum* in volume 5 of *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. John M. Headley, with English Translation by Sister Scholastica Mandeville (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), esp. “More Against Luther: The Substance of the Diatribe” in Vol. 5, Part 2, pp. 732-74, which emphasizes their ecclesiological differences.

that we do find that He has made us. In IV.11, the messenger who is More's interlocutor then moves the discussion on to a distinction: whatever the German Lutherans may hold, surely the English sympathizers for Luther could not be so mad as to believe that everything hangs on a destiny to which we make no contribution by our free choices. More then undertakes a lengthy effort to show that various English Lutherans have in fact taken this position.

But to stay with the subject at hand, we might note the similarity of More's reasoning here to the reflections of Augustine at the development of some of his own seminal ideas on free choice of the will, as formulated in the course of his dabbling with Manicheanism. The proponents of that religion had attempted a position that was as attractive as it was inconsistent, namely, that they might claim the credit for the good they did when they identified themselves with the forces of Light, but then attribute the wickedness of yielding to fleshly desires to the malevolence of the forces of Darkness. To say "the devil made me do it" and to mean not that we are pointing to the source of temptation to which we freely yielded, but that we bear no responsibility for that wickedness is a convenient rationalization, but not a very successful theoretical explanation.

Augustine's hard-won clarity on these matters—matters on which there is admittedly more clarity in what we cannot hold without making a mockery of moral life and of divine goodness than in what we can positively provide by way of philosophical explanation—has long provided Christianity with a consistent and helpful picture of the situation. If his early work *De libero arbitrio* (begun in the year 387 or 388, finished between 391 and 395⁷) risks erring on the side of what subsequently came to be known as Pelagianism, his mature work of a similar name, *De gratia et libero arbitrio* (written from 426 to 427) states clearly the paradoxical pair of assertions that we need to hold and then do as well as we can to reconcile. "There is always," Augustine asserts, "within us free choice, but it is not always good."⁸ Whether he is thinking politically and socially, as in the *City of God*, where he repeatedly argues that we are all born in the earthly city and that only some become members of the heavenly city during their earthly pilgrimage, or whether he is writing theologically and pastorally, as in the *Enchiridion* (from 421/422), where he notes: "He who is the servant of sin is free to sin. And hence he will not be free to do right, until, being freed from sin, he shall begin to be the servant of righteousness. And this is true liberty, for he has pleasure in the righteous deed; and it is at the same time a holy bondage, for he is obedient to the will of God."⁹

The standard position that Augustine takes in his mature years is that we are slaves of sin from our birth (in part, the source of the Lutheran use of the term "bondage"), but that life on this earth still involves making free choices (for we are "free to sin"). Choosing to the right thing means using the freedom of the will to submit to God's will and to become instead the servant of justice. Augustine's position is thus a curious kind of inversion of the Manichean inconsistency, namely, that our power of free choice is sufficient for choosing wickedness but of insufficient help to us in choosing goodness. The most true or authentic freedom requires that we be freed by the grace of

⁷ For the dating of the works of Augustine, see *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. xliii-il.

⁸ *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, ch. 31; translated as "On Grace and Free Will" by P. Holmes in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oates, vol. 1 (New York NY: Random House, 1948), p. 758. I have emended the translation here slightly by replacing the words "free will" with "free choice" so as better to reflect Augustine's word choice, which here and throughout is *liberum arbitrium [voluntatis]*, not *libera voluntas*. The terminology is quite important here, and to speak about "free will" rather than "free choice of the will" risks missing the many ways in which the will is quite determined, such as in the way in which the will is necessarily attracted to what appears as good; freedom resides in choice, not in desire.

⁹ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, ch. 9 §30, translated as *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, edited by Henri Bapollucci (Chicago IL: Henry Regnery, 1961), p. 37.

Christ. This position, difficult as it is in certain respects, permits the follower of Augustine to hold the doctrine that the power of free choice given to us by God is not removed from human nature by the corruption of the Fall but that it is made nearly useless by sin for the good works that would merit salvation. Positively considered, this power does continue to permit us to choose this or that. Soteriologically considered, so long as the human being remains in slavery to sin, that person cannot make a good choice in the sense of a choice that is truly moved by the love of God and thus rightly ordered. To assert the point in the paradoxical manner that Augustine so often employed, one has the freedom to will as one chooses but not the well-ordered habits of freedom that would enable us always to will as one should. What God's grace brings is not so much the ontological power of choice but the strength to order one's choices correctly, that is, in such a way that they are genuinely motivated by the love of God so that all the rest of our order of loves will be appropriately disposed. Even while adding the considerable sophistication of a faculty psychology, Aquinas maintains the basic outlines of this Augustinian position when he says, for instance:

Without grace, free choice is incapable of the kind of good which is above human nature; and—because it is by this kind of good that man merits eternal life—it is apparent that man cannot merit without grace. The kind of good which is proportioned to human nature, however, man can accomplish by his free choice. Augustine accordingly says that man can cultivate fields, build houses, and do a number of other things by his free choice without actual grace. Although man can perform good actions of this kind without ingratiatory grace, he cannot perform them without God, since nothing can enter upon its natural operation except by the divine power, because a secondary cause acts only by the power of the first cause.¹⁰

This view would remain the predominant Catholic position, and it is taken up by Erasmus, for instance, in an approach that More would also echo, as when Erasmus criticizes Luther for an excessively nugatory position on freedom: “They singularly exaggerate original sin who maintain that the best powers of human nature are so corrupt that it can accomplish nothing of itself except to hate God and be ignorant of him.”¹¹ In the same context, Erasmus offers a version of the argument that we saw in More, namely that there is something intrinsically contradictory about the Lutheran stance. The Bible urges us constantly to strive, since we are going to be judged by God. But it would be impossible to strive, Erasmus notes, if our will could do nothing of itself. Interestingly, Melancthon takes Erasmus's side on this question,¹² against Luther, who reiterated in many ways his basic position, such as in the following statement from *Table Talk*: “[Free choice] is not within our strength, for we are not able to do anything that is good in divine matters.”

The eventual retrenchment of subsequent Lutherans from the position of Luther himself is no surprise, given the contradiction within that position. But to drive a young adherent away from a position that seems part and parcel of the larger view to which he had been giving considerable credence may well require meeting that position head on. It seems to me that it is this need that explains the virulence of More's expressions here. More's general patience with the young

¹⁰ Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 24, a. 14, c., translated by Robert W. Schmidt, S.J., as *Truth*, vol. 3 (Albany NY: Preserving Christian Publications, 1993; orig., Chicago IL: Henry Regnery, 1952), p. 205.

¹¹ Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio Diatribe*, from the text printed in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. and trans. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1969). This volume contains Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio diatribe* (1524), translated as “On the Freedom of the Will” and Luther's reply *De servo arbitrio* (1525), translated as “On the Bondage of the Will.”

¹² See Kolb, pp. 81-95 for an account of the development of Melancthon's views between 1530 and 1559. See also Timothy J. Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness: Philip Melancthon's Exegetical Dispute with Erasmus of Rotterdam* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), esp. pp. 67-79.

messenger in the course of their lengthy discussion does much to win his good will. But when the course of an argument demands a sharper repudiation of a pernicious doctrine, More does not hesitate to summon the appropriate energy, as here. Mindful of the balance that Christian philosophers and theologians have counseled in affirming both grace and free choice of the will, More puts the contradiction in Luther's position sharply, and thereby adds in this section of the text an important component of his refutation of the heresy that is tempting his guest.