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GOODNESS AND RATIONAL CHOICE IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES¹

Twentieth-century discussion of the history of the notions of will was dominated by debates about whether free choice is compatible with efficient causal determinism. One consequence of this was that a related but distinct issue — whether free choice is compatible with determination by final causes and, in particular, compatible with the *givenness* of ends of action — was largely ignored. It was not always so. In late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages debates about the nature of choice centered as much (if not more) on the issue of *rational determinism* than on its efficient causal cousin. The aim of this paper is to trace part of the story of the evolution of discussion of this issue and of the evolution of conceptions of choice and of freedom which paralleled it.

The debate about rational determinism is complex and several strands may be distinguished within it. One of them, which I want to identify in order to set aside for the purposes of this paper, concerns whether rational deliberation need always play a role in action at all. Historically this issue was raised in a particularly acute form by Ghazali and responded to by Averroes in his *Tahafut al-Tahafut*. We might pose it (following a terminology introduced by Sydney Morgenbesser and Edna Ullmann-Margalit) as the issue of whether picking always involves choosing.² Ghazali considers the case of a hungry man lying beneath a date tree laden with dates many of which look equally attractive. He claims that such a man need not deliberate about which of these dates to pick. He has, says Ghazali, a power simply to pick without having a sufficient reason for picking the date he picks.

Ghazali's point is that the explanation for the picking lies not in a property of the date but in a power of the agent. Ghazali goes on to claim that if we posit such a power in humans we should posit it in God — and so God

can pick a time at which the universe is to begin without there being anything about that time in particular which attracts him. This idea, that the power to determine itself to an alternative lies with the agent and not with the object of the action, is closely connected with the thought that the principle that everything which is moved is moved by another has exceptions in the realm of the will. This complex of ideas, worked out in the Latin tradition by Olivi, Scotus and Ockham among others, plays an important role in the debate about rational determinism in the later Middle Ages, but seems not to be in play in the Latin tradition before the translation of Ghazali and I will ignore it here. I want instead to focus on debate about two other theses.

- A. Everything sought is sought under the aspect of (that is because it is perceived to be) good.
- B. Deliberation is always with respect to means rather than with respect to ends.

I suggest that the history of the theory of rational choice within the Latin tradition from late antiquity to the thirteenth century is importantly a history of consideration, complication and to some extent rejection of these two theses. First let me make a bit clearer what I take to be at stake.

The thesis (A) that everything chosen is chosen under the aspect of the good is in some ways an analogue of the thesis about self-motion with which this paper does not deal. Here I want to focus on only one aspect of the thesis — the question of the *unity* of the good. Granted that the ends of human action are given there still remains the question whether they are many. If we also grant that everything sought is sought under the aspect of the good then to suppose that the ends of action are plural commits one to supposing that goodness itself is in some way multiplex. I want to consider the development of this idea.

The thesis (B) that deliberation is always with respect to means and never with respect to ends is also connected with the question of the givenness of ends. If ends are not given but are somehow chosen then one would expect deliberation with respect to them. But even if ends are given there may still be some significant sense in which there may be deliberation with respect to them. Ends may conflict — or at least may appear to conflict. When ends appear to conflict a rational agent may have to choose between them. This process may involve something which it would not be out of place to label deliberation.

In the early Middle Ages these theses were the foci of complexly intertwined debates. I shall argue that the conventional position emerging out of late Greek philosophy and represented in the early Middle Ages by Boethius, maintained both the unity of the good and the confinement of deliberation to means. Another tradition, influenced perhaps by Rabbinic scholarship, had begun to challenge both these theses as early as Paul of Tarsus (c. 5-67 AD). This second tradition received an important impetus from Augustine and reached a particularly interesting pitch of development in Anselm of Canterbury from whom it influenced the later Middle Ages.

THE UNITY OF THE GOOD

Boethius was not the first to claim both that the good (for humans) is unitary and that deliberation is confined to means. I have claimed elsewhere that this is Aristotle's position and I believe a strong case could be made for it being a position on which Peripatetics, Platonists and Stoics could agree.³ Nonetheless the Boethian development of it is not merely a repetition of earlier thought.

Boethius is very clear that the good for humans is unitary. For example, in *Consolatio*, III, Prose IX, speaking of the good he writes:

This, therefore, which is one and simple in nature human depravity splits up and while it seeks to obtain a part of that thing which lacks parts neither obtains a portion (of which there are none) nor the very thing itself — which it is not at all seeking.⁴

Boethius identifies human happiness with the good *for* humans and that with the Good itself. In turn he identifies the Good itself with Unity, Being, and God. We become happy by becoming good and we become good by participating in Goodness itself. Our goal is union with Goodness itself (which Boethius does not hesitate to identify with becoming divine).⁵ It is a single goal which is implanted in us by nature and which we pursue whether we realize it or not.

Everything, whether rational or not, pursues the Good but, Boethius argues, rational natures pursue the good in a special way — they have *libertas arbitrii*. This Boethius' Lady Philosophy explains this way:

“There is (*libertas arbitrii*)” she said “nor would there ever have been a rational nature which did not possess *libertas arbitrii*. For what is able naturally to use reason has judgment (*iudicium*) by which it dis-

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