

Dealing with Free Will in Contemporary Theology: is It Still a Question?

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Abstract:

Free will is a very hot issue in several theoretical settings, but less in theology, or at least not as much as use to be in former times, when the discussions on sinfulness, grace and freedom were igniting a long season of controversies, especially in the Reformation time. Even in ecumenical dialogue apparently free will does not play a great role, since the reached consensus seems quite peaceful and agreement dominates over discussion. However, some theological insights, especially Karl Rahner reflections, are still worthy to consider and possibly theological anthropology should pay more attention to the current debate and its consequences for the way we understand human nature and its relationship with God.

Keywords: Karl Rahner, Christian anthropology, Imago Dei, sin, grace.

1. Preliminary Layout

Theological treatment of free will poses a good ‘case of study’ to test Christian anthropology and its adequacy to new cultural and philosophical settings. Several new theological issues related to freedom in human beings arise in the new context, when comparing with traditional views. That topic is involved in the three main principles that theology trying to understand human person has always claimed: the *Imago Dei* human attribute, which includes freedom as a postulate or condition to proper talk about similarity to God; the failure state expressed as sinfulness, which has been viewed in terms of freedom trimming or limited; and the effects of grace, including among them – with some nuances – a restored full capacity for freedom, liberation from sin’s bondage.

Traditional and confessional positions have enriched a long discussion trying to better assess the extent that free will can reach, or its limits and boundaries, due to sin and other human limits. However, in some way, old confessional discussions seem to be overcome by new awareness and the revision of early held positions concerning the corrupting effect of sin and the re-generating consequence of grace. This is a quite realistic approach which has always moved between the empirical observation regarding human behaviour, and the speculative reflection inside a revealed framework. Theology describing or discerning free will has never been only ‘speculative’ and *a priori*; often the stated positions reflected internal struggles, or a way to observe human nature around, with its many trials, and its dark side too. However, the Biblical text has functioned as a

framework that provided a way to interpret and understand what was being lived and what could be perceived and wished as salvation. To some extent, the long history of controversies around free will in Christian theology reflects developments in the environment and broader anthropological positions in their time *Geist*, with its openness and despair, with its more or less optimistic feelings; modelled on historical circumstances of achievement and frailty.

Now the question that still looms is whether the discussion we drag for centuries is still a ‘theological question’ that deserves to pay much more attention, or this is a question around a subject that has already known every possible answer, and reflects an exhaustion state. Perhaps nowadays it might be better to leave it to philosophers and to their distinctions, somewhat alien to theologians, tired after a long discussion period that appears to many of little use today. Possibly the topic has reached some maturity and most theologians are convinced about a standard position that satisfies every side. Furthermore, the issue has been displaced by other worries and more urgent challenges linked to Christian faith and its survival in very secularized societies.

‘Freedom’ is no longer a theological hot topic, at least in Catholic theology, where it is hard to find new contributions – besides the handbooks covering Christian anthropology and its historical process – and able to deploy models that, at least, would be able to engage with recent developments in philosophy and scientific study of human nature. However, in my opinion, this is something that still needs to be assumed and tackled. The ideal of freedom has given place in Catholic theology, since the seventies, to the so called *Liberation theology*, reflecting more practical concerns about the huge contrast between what was stated by the standard theology of freedom and salvation, and the reality in which entire populations were living, in conditions which did not allow to enjoy the demanding standards linked to Christian models of free will. These practical issues can be traced more generally to moral theology and its concerns regarding responsibility and accountability depending on how much free will can be recognized.

In the present reflection, my aim will be twofold. First, I will engage in a dialogue with Karl Rahner’s attempt – one of the last and more originals – to render a completely updated theological account on human freedom, showing its full theological character and its limits and paradoxes. And second, I will try to figure out what could become a theological agenda for dealing with free will, after recent developments, both in the philosophical discussion, and in scientific research, both designing a completely new context for theological reflection. Possibly a third point could be offered, connecting with the former points: the centrality of freedom for theology requires to connect it with love’s experience and commandment. This is however a point that needs to be developed in a different study.

2. A ‘Modern’ Theology of Freedom

A theology of free will – very controversial – has always existed, since the Patristic times, through medieval disputes until Reformation times. Describing the extent of human freedom has been central in the anthropological reflection moved by great authors. A distinction that signed the School theology in Middle Ages has been the greater or lesser space recognized to human freedom, as a result of two different broad systems: one based on the ‘universals’ theory, held by Thomas Aquinas, and limiting the reach of free will into a great created and harmonious plan; and a system giving more space to contingency and free process at various levels, which was characteristic of Duns Scotus and other Franciscans, and giving place to a more unpredictable, open and free world. The issue of freedom was hence deeply entrenched in big cosmological and epistemological views, it was a substantial part of the wide world view held by different theological schools.

Some attempts can be found in modern times to update theological motives, as for instance in Kierkegaard radical treatment concerning decision. In Catholic terms possibly the most interesting and updated attempt – for his own time – to develop a theology of freedom was moved by Karl Rahner, mostly in an article published in 1965 [9]. The title is very explicit: *Theology of freedom*, and it deals with that issue inside his own theoretical framework: transcendental neo-Kantian anthropology. The question now is what can we still learn today from that attempt and

which points require some updating, complement or even deep revision. The points I will focus more are the following: the Christian historical vindication of freedom; the very theological character of free will; the paradox of theologically understood freedom; and the relational character of freedom in that context.

a. Christian Radicalization of the Concept of Free Will

The paper starts with a strong statement, almost apologetic:

... the real freedom of choice as such – i.e. the freedom which consists not only in the fact that man cannot be forced from without but also in that a free decision about himself is demanded from him which, therefore, is rather a demand and a task than freedom – can alone already be seen quite clearly in Christianity [9, p. 179].

In other words, only inside Christian faith human beings become fully responsible before the eternal God's love and demanding the highest responsibility. The revelation in Christ assumes a founding character for human freedom, which becomes exalted to the highest imaginable level, as far as it becomes freedom from God and towards God.

It is interesting, nevertheless, to consider other texts regarding the Christian idea of freedom and its relationship with philosophy. For instance, a brief Encyclopedia entry from 1975 states:

For a systematic theology of freedom which will go beyond the framework of the post-Tridentine systems of grace and free will, only preliminary suggestions are provided by modern philosophy. The basic principles of a theological anthropology will point the way to a deeper grasp of freedom [8].

Previously Rahner reminds that “The theological notion of freedom was carried on from the start in a dialogue with the philosophical notion of freedom throughout its history” [8, p. 544]. Modern times have developed a new stage to the analysis of free will, but the author complains that the modern debate has been scarcely received in theology. Rahner's aim is to fill that void and to provide a fruitful theological elaboration of the available ideas elaborated by modern thinkers. The critical point seems to be that Rahner uses the new frame to better appreciate the value and meaning of the traditional Christian view. He seems to be trustful to the enunciated principle: a Christian view on freedom was closely entrenched with the philosophical reflection – at least until modern times; such dependency has been unjustly broken and needs to be restored as a condition to better appreciate the deep meaning of Christian freedom, and to exalt its value. It appears that only inside the reference to the modern secular philosophy of freedom, we can recognize the theological meaning of the Christian contribution.

A first consideration comes to mind: Rahner's thought can be placed in good company with contemporary authors who vindicate the central role played by Christian faith in configuring modern mentality and values. Very recent titles like: Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the individual: The origins of Western liberalism* (2015), and Nick Spencer, *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity has shaped our values* (2016), witness to an historiographic trend that moves in a similar direction: to vindicate the necessary role played by Christian faith in the modern development of liberal ideas, which, at the same time, are founded on a deep trust on human free capacity to decide and to find the most convenient course of action, at the individual and the social level. The related question concerning how far can modern liberal societies go when such original impulse fades away is not clear, even if very pessimistic forecasts are available, especially at the hands of *Radical Orthodoxy* theologians and their program of deconstruct modern and secular ideas [4], [5].¹

A second consideration comes to mind when the temporal distance is taken into account, regarding Rahner diagnostic. After several decades from that subtle criticism, still similar concerns

arise: philosophical reflection has moved forward and since the sixties an abundant philosophical corpus has dealt with free will in almost all possible ways. Once more, it seems that the theological appreciation of freedom should recover from the delay that Rahner perceived in his own time, to accomplish a sort of historical destiny: freedom can be theologically understood only in close dialogue with one's own time philosophical reflection. This is nowadays an unfinished theological business, except that we admit that such a task has been accomplished – and quite decently – by philosophical theology, the discipline that would have assumed that reflective role, after some theological neglect, disinterest or even fatigue after a long and seemingly fruitless discussion several centuries earlier.

b. Free Will as a Fully Theological Category

In Rahner's analysis, human freedom is seen in pure theological terms, to the extent that radical freedom can be only understood in reference to the divine mystery, and that freedom reveals the greatness of divine's gift to humans. An almost 'Anselmian argument' version emerges here: the greatest that can be conceived in humans is the highest degree of freedom, but that possibility can only be reached if it is related to God and sustained by Him. Rahner program seems oriented towards recovering the lost theological dimension that was missed – or perhaps secularized – in the modern approach to free will, and this can only be reached when such an experience is explicitly linked to the divine being.

This is an old and often told story: modern thinking was suspicious regarding divine dependency, as a condition which would result in a trimming of human freedom. As Kant did stress very explicitly, modernity is vindicated as autonomy from external authorities, and God was surely in that list. In other words, the divine was thought ever since and at different modernity stages in terms of heteronomy, dependence, alienation, and a limiting power or presence. Rahner manoeuvres – as has always done – in the opposite sense: where others have seen God as a competing power, Rahner stresses his necessity to found and render possible human freedom; where others see in God a limiting presence, Rahner finds it as an instance of empowerment – applying a contemporary terminology! Christian faith follows in Rahner's version always a similar pattern: it becomes the best way to encourage human awareness and to render possible what otherwise would be hardly conceivable. In short, God becomes the condition of possibility to human freedom; and the freedom we can experience is always placed in a horizon of divine gift.

Some consideration comes to mind in this case as well. To some extent what is here on play is the hypothetical secularization of the Christian understanding – and foundation – of free will. As Karl Löwith has pointed at the same time when Rahner was developing his analysis, modernity could be understood as an exercise in usurpation and reconversion of Christian topics to become fully secularized and placed in a different context, to be reused and serve other interests, once they have been deprived from any theological reference [3]. Rahner efforts seem to point to a recovery of modern topics and ideals inside a Christian matrix, to show that they can work very well in the religious context, perhaps after a convenient lifting and updating to adapt them to the modern times and mentality. Christian faith in God's presence at historical and anthropological levels renders the modern project theologically legitimate and explained.

At this point it becomes unavoidable the reference to Charles Taylor and his attempt in *A Secular Age* [10] to correct a trajectory in Christian praxis – especially in Catholic style and magisterium – to come to terms with that modern development, and to adapt to the new situation signed by the expressivist turn, as exposed in the book *Sources of the Self* [11]. The question now is to what extent Rahner's endeavour was successful in his time, and how this exercise at 're-theologizing' a topic that was fully transferred to the secular realm could be re-assumed in the Christian mind. Our philosophical time would feel possibly uncomfortable with the transcendental categories that Rahner applied, and which were quite usual in the German context of those years, and perhaps ignored in English speaking areas. However, the challenge he was able to address is still looming for us, two generations later.

c. Paradoxes Arising From Freedom Theology

The mentioned article reports about a big paradox at the centre of Rahner's transcendental treatment of that human trait: God is at the same time the foundation or condition of possibility of human freedom, but, nevertheless, humans can use that faculty to deny their own source or foundation: "that freedom, however, is freedom *vis-à-vis* its all-supporting ground itself, that in other words it can culpably deny the very condition of its own possibility in an act which necessarily reaffirms this condition is the extreme statement about the nature of created freedom" [9, p. 181].

"God is affirmed and denied at the same time" [9, p. 181]. Such paradox is well described by the own theologian, and by others. The topic has deserved even a monographic research [6].

In principle, Rahner can feel close to Kant and other philosophers exposing the 'freedom antinomies', a classic of modern thought. However, in this version the paradox appears as fully theological, or as another 'theological paradox'. Critical voices can point to the flaws in the transcendental pattern serving Rahner's program, and which would be guilty of a form of self-referential paradox. The interesting thing is how Rahner manages to address the challenge, and to point to a radical level in which freedom is at the end the possibility of a self-negation (not in 'kenotic sense', of course!), at the time that negates its own foundation. To some extent such decision, possible, brings to light the definitive character attributed to freedom and the tragic consequence lurking in such decision.

In that argument arises something quite intriguing, since the free decision towards God, the 'ground' of free decision, entails a very self-destructive consequence, something perhaps too costly when conceiving freedom's foundation in that high theologically loaded view; a complete failure in self-understanding, a deep alienation appear as a normal consequence [9, p. 185]. Perhaps a less theologically intense concept would carry less severe consequences at the anthropological level; the price can be seen as too high for assuming that theological foundation. This point is probably linked to other modern understanding of free will as a radical decision which would endow with meaning one's own life. Surely Kierkegaard comes to mind, as does the XX century existentialism exploiting similar views about the radical character of life bounding decisions.

The question now is how much dated is that view, and whether covering human freedom with that radical theistic meaning still makes sense, when the cultural environment has changed so much, existential concerns have been downplayed and a theological-radical view of freedom appears to today sensitivity as quite far from what is felt and lived in broad cultural settings. Some normative issue is at stake in this case, and a question opens, in the sense that possibly a correlation can be found between the complete secularization of freedom and its devaluation and even banalization in current cultural terms. Are we again before a new version of the modernity malaise?

d. The Relational Character of Freedom

In Rahner's analysis, freedom clearly serves the cause of God's love: it is freedom to love God, since this is the 'fundamental human act', the one projecting sense on every aspect of human life, redeeming it from all its 'darkest hours', and helping to cope with risks and sin. That love is the 'human integrating principle'. However new issues arise inside this attempt at conceiving God's love and its foundational character, its 'athematic' or 'transcendental' condition. It seems that such a condition could prevent a real experience of love: you can hardly love what is constituting yourself, comprising human freedom. Here Rahner resorts to a distinction to avoid that new difficulty: between that divine previous and constitutive presence, and the one which can be thematised or expressed in 'categorical' terms. But the real answer lies in the mediation of love as neighbour's love, in whom the original relational character of freedom can be fully expressed and lived.

Again some suspicion arises in that schema, based on a strong theological description of human freedom, with all its attached conditions. The problem can stem from a perspective that reflects modern anthropologies, built on the individual and its transcendental constitution, instead of

building from a relational schema that privileges alterity. Possibly Rahner's view is still too much self-centred, even if the human proper foundation is given from outside, and relates to God as a source of being and freedom; the alterity is expressed in terms that are still too much referred to one's self, and less to an external and original experience of calling and relatedness, as has been stressed by many authors moving from the perceived Enlightenment individualism. This is the danger of the transcendental categories that Rahner relies on: that at the end the modern self-sustaining individual and the one intimately and secretly founded in the Divine presence become undistinguishable. Rahner seems to work in a time not yet deeply touched by the alternative anthropology built on the priority recognized to other's presence or the external input they provide, the one that has been championed by the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, among many others. From such an anthropology a different theology of freedom would be required and could be built. Indeed the relational character of freedom in Rahner's version appears as not relational enough.

3. What Needs to Be Assumed in a More Updated Theology of Freedom

Engaging with Rahner's theological treatment of free will offers a good opportunity to review an effort made half a century ago, fully committed to a strong philosophical strand of his time and to learn from that endeavour to engage in our days with that thorny issue. Possibly the task remains open and invites to follow those footsteps when free will is considered still a theological question, and not something already settled and a topic too much discussed in past centuries and now perceived as tiresome.

I will propose three strategies or moments as a program aimed at updating freedom's theological approach: learning from the current philosophical debate; assuming a more explicit 'empirical stance'; and considering freedom inside the believing process as a general framework.

a. Learning From the Current Philosophical Debate

Anybody acquainted with the contemporary treatment of free will can recognize the spectre stretching between the extreme positions of 'determinists' and 'libertarians' and the somewhat in the middle 'compatibilists'. We count with excellent descriptions of such rich spectrum, as for instance the excellent systematic review provided recently by our colleague Aku Visala [13]. The least we can say is that the described panorama speaks for an unavoidable pluralism and an unsettled discussion in which the different parties have good arguments to support their own positions. Probably this is the current situation and there is no reason to expect that things will change in the near future.

The question now is what can theology learn from that state of things, provided that we still admit that theology can take advantage from a dialogue with the philosophy produced in our days, instead of keeping more self-referential and dealing with its own tradition and former ideas, what can be appreciated as 'classic'. Possibly theological development can feel some familiar sensation: we have been already there, could say the theologian used to a hermeneutical and historical analysis. Theological controversies, at least since the time of St. Augustin and his struggle with Pelagius, and those associated to the different Reformation versions, resulted again in an unsurmountable pluralism, this time reflected between confessional lines. Two ideas come to mind: the first is that perhaps we need to recognize that both, in the Christian and the secular philosophical realm, dealing with freedom means to struggle with too many antinomies, paradoxes and even contradictions, and hence possibly Rahner was right when describing "Freedom as a mystery" [9, p. 190], at least in the sense of posing many challenges to a reason trying to fix and to better describe it. Perhaps if we could better know and determine freedom, we would, as a result, become less free, in the same way that evil is a mystery: if we would better know evil it would become less bad. A better comparison arises with the mystery of grace, whose complete knowledge would render it less 'gracious' and effective. Since freedom is linked in Christian theology with all these categories: sin

or evil, love and grace, we move inside a territory to which we can apply the principle of limits of reason that has been recently claimed – among others – by Noam Chomsky [2].

The second application could do good use of contemporary pluralism regarding free will and try to identify to what extent the confessional boundaries from the past overlap with the present divisions, and some correlations can be traced, for example, between determinism and predestination theology; or compatibilism and theological defence of free will. The old discussion trying to render compatible free will and divine omniscience and omnipotence can be reframed in the current philosophical terms and find clear parallels. This is an exercise not just on anachronistic parallelism and contrast, but an hermeneutic reflection that could trace back in history issues that appear as constant in anthropological study.

b. A More Explicit 'Empirical Stance'

Reading Rahner's analysis on freedom one can feel the strange idealistic and aprioristic style characteristic of the speculative theology, ancient and modern. I have said before that in many cases theologians dealing with freedom were somewhat inspired by their own experience, and not just trying to interpret normative texts from what has been considered as 'divine revelation'. This is true in most cases, but sometimes we can get the impression that theological reflection has abused speculation and has lost sight from the real world and the human and social experience regarding freedom.

Freedom is a traditional topic inside Christian anthropology. In my own experience, this is a treaty that cannot rely only on hermeneutics and tradition, but needs to be updated according to the new contributions provided by auxiliary sciences trying to better understand human nature, otherwise theology would loss reality-contact in its way to know theologically human persons.

The former reflections point to a more 'empirical stance' as the Christian philosopher Bas van Fraassen [12] claimed, in order to render our theological views more updated and significant. Even if such stance has not always helped the ongoing philosophical discussion, in my opinion developments in the empirical study of human behaviour provide excellent inputs to theologians trying to resist the pressure from more reductionist positions. For instance, the studies of Baumeister and colleagues [1] about the role played by conscious mental processes means a blow against those reducing the reach of that faculties, and hence a vindication for free conscious decision making and all its moral implications.

Theology should be aware about these discussions and rely more on empirical evidence provided by scientific approaches, after tests and accurate results when trying to estimate the extent of human freedom and human frailty.

c. Freedom as a Belief

This is possibly the most controversial claim I am doing in my paper. Several ideas formerly exposed point towards this conclusion: the issue of freedom is less related to evidence or cannot be settled by philosophical argument, and it becomes at the end more and more a sort of belief, and hence it could be better understood inside the theoretical framework designed as 'belief studies'. This claim can find support in the unsurpassable pluralism in the past and in present times, and still more in the fact that free will is associated with ideological positions, the most patent, modern liberalism, i.e. with general beliefs and values.

That point should not be received as a surprise: confidence in higher or lower freedom in humans becomes at the end a sort of belief, more or less warranted, but nevertheless a belief, which can assume both versions: the religious and the secular; possibly a kind of transversal dynamic can be described beyond the religious-secular divide line. We can describe which traits can be identified with such belief, or with the contrary, the one that states that we hold a very limited free capacity in our behaviour. Indeed, for many analysts this is one of the last division lines in the contemporary

world: between those who trust freedom and consider worthy to assume the risks associated with it, and those who distrust freedom because of the chaos it entails and threatens.

Placing the issue of 'freedom' inside that very recent research field, and very interdisciplinary, trying to better know how beliefs are acquired, develop, change and get extinct would have only advantages. This is a meta-reflexive move and one that possibly will not solve the conundrums associated with free will, but it would help to better understand our approach to freedom and to analyse it in terms of credences placed besides other beliefs, with whom they interact and form conceptual networks, helping us to transit our world in a very uncertain time.²

In a similar vein as happens with free will conceptions, beliefs come in degrees too, or rather, they can be described as an spectrum ranging from lowest to highest intensity or conviction. Again we have to deal in this case more with probabilistic reasoning and Boolean logic than with certainties or apodictic arguments. As with other beliefs, we can analyse in this case too, the factors associated with its acquisition, change and loss; with its increase and decline, and to place it in a broader network connected with other convictions, more or less close, concerning human condition.

The suspicion arising now is that such a manoeuvring could result in a weakening of freedom, reduced to a simple belief. However, the world of beliefs is anything but simple and weak, and this is true when we speak about other beliefs, notably the religious ones. Sometimes people sacrifice everything for their beliefs, and this has happen too in cases where people died to support their belief in freedom. Not a world of certainties, but a world of probabilities and beliefs seem to be the one we are getting acquainted, and perhaps this is good news for free will and less for more deterministic positions.

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Notes

1. John Milbank and other theologians following him have been very vocal in denouncing modernity failures and the perversion of liberal models of free will.
2. For an account and review on recent 'belief studies' see: [7].