

Freedom, Grace, and Destiny

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Ultimately, then, the free person
is the one who is a son, who recognizes
God's paternity as a grace.

In a context of Christian philosophy—I want to insist on the adjective “Christian,” because we should have to proceed quite differently on an occasion where this qualifier was not expressly applied to philosophy—there are at least two reasons that impel us to reflect on the question of freedom in the light of Romano Guardini’s famous work, *Freedom, Grace, and Destiny*.¹ Both of these reasons already play a role in Guardini’s understanding of his own project. Yet they have lost none of their urgency, indeed, they have perhaps grown even more urgent, even though the general background against which we frame the issues looks rather different (despite significant strands of continuity) from

¹The brilliant thinker and inspired teacher of many generations of young people wrote this text in 1948: *Freiheit, Gnade, Schicksal: Drei Kapitel zur Deutung des Daseins* (Munich, 1948). For an English translation see, *Freedom, Grace, and Destiny: Three Chapters in the Interpretation of Existence* (New York: Pantheon, 1961).

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what it did when Guardini, in other respects a prophetic observer of the trajectory of modern culture, wrote his famous book.

The first reason is, so to speak, strictly anthropological. Without giving up the intellectual gains of the great tradition of Christian thought, our reflection on freedom must, in the context of modernity, do full justice to a basic datum: Man can ask himself about his essence only from within his existence. This has nothing to do with Sartre's affirmation that "existence precedes essence," from which the French philosopher deduces the negation of freedom. Rather, it means that we need to take seriously, as Balthasar does, the dramatic nature of anthropology. When the individual man reflects upon himself, he finds himself already acting on the stage of the "great theater of the world."² It follows that we get the requisite light for an adequate inquiry into man's essence (which in the end cannot be avoided) by considering all the elements that constitute his existence. This requirement is further underscored by the nature of freedom itself, inasmuch as its constitutive core includes a "self-positing" [*autoporsi di sé*] that structurally implies the "I" in action. The analysis of the nature and the dynamisms of freedom therefore calls for a careful examination of all the factors that constitute man both as an individual and as a person.

Now one can legitimately ask whether for the purposes of this examination Christian philosophers may bracket grace (which is ultimately the event of Jesus Christ himself). Of course they can! Numerous debates concerning the nature of Christian philosophy, the very possibility of it, or even its theoretical relevance, show this to be so.³ Yet increasingly fewer philosophers accept the validity of an anthropological option that presupposes a sort of *epoché* concerning the nexus between the event of Jesus Christ and man. This is often the case simply because a "nature" construed as a neutral meeting place for various worldviews strikes contemporary cultural sensibilities as far more problematic than a proposal of the scandalous

²"This means that, if we want to ask about man's 'essence,' we can do so only in the midst of his dramatic performance of existence" (H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, *Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 335. See also, id., *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), where Balthasar explains at length his proposal to employ the categories of the theater.

³See *La filosofia cristiana nei secoli XIX e XX*, 2 vols. (Rome, 1994).

reasonability of the event of Jesus Christ. Christ is the true silhouette of man (as Przywara put it), which, however, does not abolish nature and natural law or deprive them of a certain objectivity and autonomy.⁴ Now, in order to arrive at the constitutive features of freedom through reflection on man as he really exists (that is, in Christ), we must consider this freedom to the extent that it is woven together with the other factors that form the basic fabric of existence.⁵ Hence Guardini's interweaving of freedom, grace, and destiny.

Our first, anthropological reason also suggests the second, which seems to underscore the validity of our option to analyze freedom in relation to grace and destiny. This second reason is a methodological one. In the "Foreword" to his famous work, Guardini insists that modern understanding of the faith has been colored by the late Medieval split between philosophy and theology, that is, by the loss of the "totality" [*tutto*] that alone enables us to understand Christianity as an integral whole. This split was due in part to the legitimate concern to safeguard the gratuity of grace. Nevertheless, it brought in its train the loss of the idea of nature as creation and thus of the "unity" of the Father's "pre-determined plan."⁶ The consequences of this split were hardly nugatory. Indeed, Guardini could go so far as to say that "the believer no longer stands with his faith amid the concrete, actual world and he no longer rediscovers the world in his faith."⁷ Also because "the riches of revelation are inexhaustible, but we have to put our questions to them, and these questions come from the reality of the world. Equally unbounded are the possibilities for actions which lie in the figure and the power of Christ, but they have to be discovered, and we discover them in the measure in which real life approaches Christ."⁸

The present reflection on freedom will therefore be guided not only by the dramatic nature of anthropology, but also by the principle of "thinking towards the whole from the whole." Eschewing any extrinsicism between philosophy and theology, nature and grace, *ratio* [reason] and *fides* [faith], our method will

⁴*Gaudium et spes*, 36.

⁵See R. Guardini, *Freedom, Grace, and Destiny*, 152.

⁶*Ibid.*, 9–12.

⁷*Ibid.*, 9.

⁸*Ibid.*, 11.

be to lay hold of the reality of man in his existence. It is there that his essence is revealed.⁹

Within the horizon of the totality, man's ontological link with the person of Christ means that freedom, with all of its autonomy, is grounded and sustained by *grace*. Man's destiny is worked out in the economy of grace and freedom.¹⁰ The destiny for which man's heart is made can thus be experienced as benevolent already in time and capable of opening up definitive (eternal) life in God. Needless to say, this vision of destiny differs radically from the pagan concept of *fatum* [fate], whose tragic necessity ultimately undermines freedom.

We will proceed in two steps: first, starting from below, we will bring out the interrelation between freedom, reality, and the intuition of destiny; second, we will seek to decipher the destiny of human freedom within the horizon of grace, that is, of Jesus Christ.

I. Freedom, Reality, and the Intuition of Destiny

1) Freedom has an altogether special status in contemporary culture, yet in certain respects this central position resembles

⁹These two aspects (the dramatic nature of man's situation and the principle of totality) are, according to Heidegger, already characteristic of metaphysics as such: "Hence the precept: every metaphysical question has to be posed in its totality and always in terms of the essential position of the existent that asks it" (M. Heidegger, *Che cosa è la metafisica*, ed. A. Carlini, 3rd ed. [Florence, 1985], 4).

¹⁰Guardini lays out the category of destiny (*Schicksal*) first anthropologically (R. Guardini, *Freedom Grace, and Destiny*, 153–186) and then theologically (ibid., 186–251). Nevertheless, in and of itself—and in any case in the present discussion, which is inspired only rhapsodically by Guardini's book—destiny always bears an objective relation to ontology, in the sense of being as *Geschick* (from which the terms *Geschehen* [happening] and *Geschichte* [history] derive) that we find in Heidegger's *Holzwege*. See Pietro Chiodi's precise definition of *Geschick* in the authorized [Italian] translation of the *Holzwege*: "In this German term *Geschick* we hear the following meanings: fitting form, necessary structure, destiny. Being has a *Geschick*—that is, a necessary structure befits the work—such that, while it reveals itself, it simultaneously hides, suspends itself . . . This *epoché* means that being reveals itself by epochs. Epochality constitutes the original and constitutive historicity—the destiny—of being. That being is *geschicklich*, is the foundation and the origin of its being *geschichtlich*, that is, historical (P. Chiodi, ed., Introduction to *Sentieri interrotti*, by M. Heidegger, 2d ed. [Florence, 1986], vi).

a kind of hypertrophic growth that tends to distort freedom, even to negate it altogether.¹¹

To be sure, freedom is as decisive a value for today's culture as reason was for the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, no honest appraisal can ignore the rather blatant signs that this freedom is in the throes of a crisis. Contemporary insistence on freedom has led to an exaggeration of some few partial aspects of it, and as a result freedom has been left hanging dizzily in mid-air.

Freedom thus seems to find itself in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, as everyday experience abundantly bears out, freedom is affirmed as a simple absolute, as the breaking down of every limitation. The human subject regards any limit placed upon freedom, any dependence whatsoever, as an intolerable burden and an object of censure. This is particularly evident in the process of education: The idea of "education" itself is often considered illiberal. The educator (and the parents), in the very act of communicating this or that value, experience a skepticism that ends up coloring their whole endeavor.¹²

On the other hand, the subject that so insistently refuses all ties finds itself in the position of not knowing what to do with its hard-won freedom. The fear of losing freedom shows up, paradoxically, as a fear of exercising it. Freedom becomes incapable of risk—understood in an objective sense as the conscious self-projection of the "I" towards the real—and so causes a sort of internal paralysis of the "I."

Where, then, do we locate the cause of this dead-end which freedom has run up against? In a few words, we could say that freedom is in a state of crisis because it attempts to do without an object. I do not mean this only in the sense of Schopenhauer's "radical denial of will,"¹³ by which the philosopher contrives to escape an illusory freedom of choice that is in fact a slavery to the determinations of the phenomenal world. I also mean it in the sense that freedom refuses to bind itself to the particular in order thereby to remain indefinitely available for the

¹¹P. Gilbert offers a summary account of the trajectory of freedom and of its negation in modernity: P. Gilbert, "Libertà e impegno" in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 147 (1996): 17–20.

¹²See the profound observations on this point already in R. Guardini, "Grundlegung der Bildungslehre," in *Vom stilleren Leben, Welt und Erziehung* (Würzburg, 1956).

¹³Cf. A. Schopenhauer, *Il mondo come volontà e rappresentazione* (Bari, 1928), 383.

totality. The apposite reference here is to the influence of Eastern philosophies and religions (especially Buddhism).¹⁴ We could say, in other words, that freedom is languishing in a crisis of abstraction. We find ourselves in a culture that has made freedom abstract, or rather, that has deprived it of its constitutive relation to reality. Freedom, which serves modernity as the emblem of the "I," appears to be hindered from encountering reality. Man is thus deprived of truth in the most elementary sense, which the perennially valid classical principle defines as the "*adaequatio intellectus et rei*," [the adequation of the intellect and the real existent]. Note that the *res* is what the spiritual subject most primarily encounters, what alone is able to pro-voke the "I" and to set it in motion.

At this point, another interesting lesson of the author of *Freedom, Grace, and Destiny* comes to mind. Guardini always described existence as a "living concrete," which is to say, as a reality that, in order to be real, has to be apprehended in its constitutive oppositions, which cannot be resolved in any synthesis.¹⁵ We might say, then, that freedom, insofar as it constitutes the existence of the living concrete, is what it is only in its polar relationship to reality. In a word, "concrete" freedom is set in motion by the impact of the real.

It is to the real, then, that we can trace back the awakening of what we may call the "elementary experience" in the spiritual subject. We define the real—which is at once world¹⁶ and history¹⁷—as that spatio-temporal framework within which man—as individual and as person, hence, in himself and in his constitutive relation with other persons and things—meets with

¹⁴Incidentally, it is useful to recall the important influence that they exercised on Schopenhauer himself. This influence, due to the orientalist Majer whom he had met in Goethe's circle, is evident from the very first edition of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818). Important methodological points relative to the problem discussed here can be gathered indirectly from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Orationis formas* (15 October 1989), 1–3.

¹⁵I have in mind Guardini's famous book, *Der Gegensatz—Versuche zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten* (Mainz, 1925).

¹⁶R. Guardini, "Mondo e persona," in *Scritti filosofici*, vol. 2 (Milan, 1964).

¹⁷R. Guardini, *Freedom, Grace, and Destiny*, 119–122. Two statements of Guardini's are worth citing here: "The world as nature is ordered to the world as history"; "The ultimate character of the world is not 'nature' but 'history.' Nature exists within the world . . . [B]ut the world as a whole cannot be identified with this concept of nature."

events, situations, and circumstances, whether inevitable or otherwise.¹⁸

2) Human freedom evidences a complex nature in its relation to reality. There are three distinct aspects here that we will now examine more closely.

a) The first aspect of freedom is one that comes to the fore under the impact of reality. We find the best account of this aspect in the tradition of Christian realism whose classical source is Thomas Aquinas. In the *De passionibus*, a treatise of the *Summa Theologica* that has lost none of its relevance, even in the face of modern psychology,¹⁹ Thomas describes the primary result of man's relationship to reality as the birth of an original attraction. In a certain sense preconscious,²⁰ this attraction polarizes the subsequent movement of the human will under the guidance of the *ratio*.

The "I" is not neutral or indifferent to the *res*, but stands before it with an *amor naturalis* [natural love]. It is moved, in other words, by a *passion* that impels and directs the subject's action ineluctably towards fulfillment:

Passion is the effect of the agent on the patient . . . the appetible object gives the appetite, first, a certain adaptation to itself, which consists in complacency in that object; and from this follows movement towards the appetible object . . . the first change wrought in the appetite by the appetible object is called *love*, and is nothing else than complacency in that object; and from this complacency results a movement towards that same object, and this movement is *desire*.²¹

Coming into contact with reality, the subject receives from it a certain *form*, an interior imprint that creates an affinity with that reality (*amor*). This love gives rise in turn to a movement

¹⁸In a certain sense, I understand "real" here in the way that Heidegger understands the world of *Dasein*. *Dasein* is always a *being-in-the-world*. However, I take this *being-in-the-world*, to which *Dasein* relates in its every act insofar as it transcends the existent [*esistente*] (understood ontically) towards the totality of what is (*das Ganze des Seienden*), in such a way that it does not prejudice the question of God. A. Carlini offers pertinent remarks in this sense in his edition of M. Heidegger, *Che cosa è la metafisica?*, v–xi, 14–15, n. 9, 35–40, 58–59.

¹⁹St. Thomas Aquinas, *De passionibus*, in *Summa Theologica*, 1–2.22–48.

²⁰The term "preconscious" is taken from Maritain. Valid observations on this question can be found in J. Maritain, "Freudisme et psychanalyse," in *Quatre essais sur l'esprit dans la condition charnelle* (Paris, 1939). Cf. A. Scola, *L'alba della dignità umana* (Milan, 1982).

²¹St. Thomas Aquinas, *S Th* 1–2.26.2.

(*desiderium*) towards the informing reality itself. This suggests that the *amor naturalis* has an ontological character: it is constitutive of the subject's relationship to the real, not an extrinsic addition to it.

The experience of freedom therefore begins, not in an indifference, but in a polarization towards, the subject's fulfillment. This polarization can be defined as an *ontological desire* that opens up man's freedom to reality by virtue of the very lovable-ness of the real itself.²² Such ontological desire is characterized by openness to reality as a whole, even though, given the structure of human nature, it must always become a determinate desire for this or that thing.

Now, it is important to point out that contemporary culture also insists that desire is the principle that informs freedom. In this respect, it differs from an earlier generation that placed all its stress on "duty." Nevertheless, our culture emphasizes desire in a way that actually enfeebles it: no longer grasping desire as an openness to reality as a whole, it makes desire the plaything of an indefinite series of "finite" objects. In other words, our culture reduces desire to the succession of its (inevitable) determinations. The *amor naturalis* disperses its energy and loses its capacity to recognize and to carry through the entire trajectory implied by reality's pro-vocation of freedom.

Why is desire, the *amor naturalis*, bartered away, as it were, for indefinite finite desires? Desire becomes fragmented as soon as the "I" opts not to accept the full pro-vocation of reality. In the end, it is a lack of realism that shatters the original desire.

The option of which we are speaking could be characterized as an example of nihilism, which is to say, of a ("weak") thought that has difficulty discovering in reality any unmistakable signs that the real exists.²³ But if *the real is not*, so to speak, *real* and

²²This desire is preconscious. While in a certain way it precedes the free act in the strict sense, it is nonetheless the indispensable substrate of that act. Needless to say, the word preconscious is not meant to rule out consideration of the subconscious understood in a Freudian sense. Cf. A. Scola, *L'alba*, 143, 152.

²³I am glad to have the opportunity to cite here the brilliant and well-known words of the late Italian philosopher, Augusto Del Noce: "Today's nihilism is in two senses a gay nihilism [*nichilismo gaio*]. First, it lacks restlessness (perhaps you could define it as the suppression of the Augustinian *inquietum cor meum*). Second, its symbol is homosexuality (you might say that its understanding of love is always homosexual even when it keeps up the man-woman relation)" (A. Del Noce, unpublished letter to

man cannot experience it, then ultimately truth does not exist and freedom itself, having become incapable of openness to the totality of the real, is left hanging in mid-air as a sort of *capacitas* [capacity] without an adequate object (beyond its inevitable determination to this or that finite being [*essente*]).

Consequently, the next step in our reflection is to consider, perforce in summary fashion, the entire path of the elementary experience of encounter with, and understanding of, reality that man follows in order to live. Before doing so, we need to make it clear that experience does not designate one mode of knowing among others, but rather indicates both the essence and process of knowing, on the one hand, and the structure of its distinctive brand of evidence, on the other.²⁴

Human knowledge, launched and sustained by the energy of freedom, marvels at the mystery of what in Thomistic language is called the *distinctio realis* [the real distinction].²⁵ Reason apprehends, at the heart of being [*essere*] itself, a difference between the concrete thing and the totality of being. This ontological difference grounds and manifests the mystery of being. And this mystery never ceases to surprise our reason, because being gives itself always and only as subsisting in each single entity [*ente*], yet it is never exhausted by it. The entity is the manifestation of being, and being is the ground that refers to the

Rodolfo Quadrelli, 1984). See the important studies on nihilism in A. Molinaro, ed., *Interpretazione del nichilismo* (Rome: Herder-Pontificia Università Lateranense, 1986).

²⁴For a rigorous foundation of the concept of experience in light of its historical roots (from Aristotle to Hegel and Heidegger), as well as an examination of its link with contemporary theology, which constantly appeals to it, see A. Bertuletti, "Il concetto di esperienza," in *L'evidenza e la fede* (Milan, 1988), 2-181.

²⁵St. Thomas was not concerned *ex professo* with the problem of the *distinctio realis*. Nevertheless, after long debates there is no longer any doubt that he in fact maintains the real distinction between essence and being. The expression *distinctio realis* is not found as such in Thomas, who sometimes uses the term *compositio realis* instead (see *De Veritate* 27.1.8). Thomas and Heidegger agree that there is a difference between being and entities, but their interpretations of this difference diverge right from the start. For Thomas it is an expression of contingency, while Heidegger absolutizes it, closing it in upon itself (cf. P. De Haro, *El Misterio del ser* [Barcelona, 1994], 152-62). More than a few authors have compared Thomas and Heidegger on the problem of metaphysics, and in particular, on the conception of *esse*. Cf. C. Fabro, *Tomismo e pensiero moderno* (Rome, 1966), 21-45.

entity as to its manifestation.²⁶ Being and entity appear simultaneously in the original structure in order to constitute what we may call symbolic evidence. This is a sort of "language," and it works not by separating the original from the immediate, but by designating the immediate reference in such a way as to refer back spontaneously to the secondary reference. This reflects the twofold property of the ontological relationship: The *difference* between being and entities, and the *inseparability* of being from entities. The original structure of the relationship of consciousness to truth and of the evidence that measures this relationship is displayed in the act of apprehending being. This act is complex, inasmuch as it always involves two different modalities of intellection. On the one hand, it entails an *anti-predicative* modality, that is, a virtual knowledge of being that is connatural to thought. The second modality, on the other hand, is *predicative*, in

²⁶We can therefore speak of a polarity, or an oscillation, in which each of the two poles (entity and being) refers to the other and in which being and entities are related as ground and manifestation. Being, then, is the depth and the ground of entities, which are the manifestation of being; ground and manifestation are inseparable and mutually referential. Wonder is the beginning, but also the permanent element of all true philosophical thinking. Indeed, man is the only entity that is capable of taking an interest in being, of grasping its richness, and of understanding its ontological difference from entities. Man is open not only to entities, but also to the being that manifests itself in them. He is saturated with an unlimited curiosity, so that neither entities nor the sum of entities, can satisfy him. Man recognizes sensible reality as adequate, as corresponding to his reason, yet at the same time he realizes that the real he experiences always contains a vanishing point that precludes any exhaustive possession. The dynamism of human reason is not stilled by a knowledge of particular entities, not even by the being of entities. Furthermore, while entities *are* insofar as they participate in the actuality of being, this actuality is nonetheless not sufficient by itself to account for the entity's having a determinate essential form, since it, being, does not belong to the order of essence. We cannot infer the necessity of any essential form from the richness of the act of being. The ontological difference therefore displays a twofold paradox that is carried in the mutual reference of entities and being. On the one hand, being is superior to entities inasmuch as it is infinite fullness, while entities are always determined and limited by their essence. On the other hand, entities are superior inasmuch they really subsist; entities "are" real, while being is that which makes them be and is not, in itself, an existing thing. A sentence of Aquinas's expresses this in exemplary fashion: "Esse significat aliquid completum et simplex, sed non subsistens" [being signifies something complete and simple, but not subsisting] (*Questiones Disputate De Potentia Dei*, 1.1).

that it is expressed in the judgment and cognizes being on the basis of the concrete existent. This second modality is apodictic, but negative, while the first modality is positive but indeterminate, and this dialectic cannot be absorbed into a higher synthesis.²⁷

That having been said, we nonetheless cannot leave the difference between being and entities hanging in mid-air à la Heidegger, as if it were an ultimate mystery that had nothing to say about itself. Rather, the difference between being and entities points imperiously beyond itself towards an ulterior difference between the world and the one foundation sufficient to account both for the being of entities and for the concrete form of those entities themselves. This foundation is what Christian philosophy has always called *Ipsum esse Subsistens*. Being itself refers to an abyssal mystery that has no other ground than itself, to an ultimate freedom.²⁸ Difference thus becomes the locus of the

²⁷I am indebted to A. Bertuletti for this explanation of the original structure. See A. Bertuletti, *Il concetto*, 166–71.

²⁸É. Gilson writes polemically against Heidegger that "[t]he absolute transcendence of being over entities fully emerges in the metaphysics of *esse* only at the moment when, theologizing the notion of being to its core, we identify it with the philosophical notion of God" (É. Gilson, *Constantes philosophiques de l'être* [Paris, 1983], 206). There is an immense body of literature on the question of the relationship between God and being. We find in it both proponents of the view that God is Being and more recent attempts to speak about God anew without assimilating him to Being. Needless to say, this renewed interest in the question was sparked by Heidegger's critique of the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics and the concomitant forgetfulness of being, on the one hand (cf. M. Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* [Pfullingen, 1957]), and by the subsequent counter-critiques that have insisted on the continuing necessity of ontology, on the other. Gilson firmly maintained "that there is only one God, and this God is being; this is the cornerstone of all Christian philosophy" (É. Gilson, *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, 2d ed. [Paris, 1989], 51). Obviously we cannot cross over from being to entities to *Ipsum Esse* [Being Itself] unless we rigorously observe the law of analogy, which requires us to pass through a negation aimed at showing clearly the limitations of our language for speaking about the mystery of Being (see St. Thomas, *Contra gentiles* 1.5). Balthasar was always sensitive to the limits of our natural knowledge of God and often repeated the axioms of St. Augustine, *si comprehendis non est Deus* [if you grasp it, it is not God], and of St. Anselm, *Deus semper maior* [God is always greater]. In the Epilogue to his Trilogy (Trier: Johannes Verlag, 1987), Balthasar parries possible charges that his reflection on being and God is guilty of onto-theology (see the second part of the *Epilog* called

manifestation of being, not as a necessity, but as a gratuitous event that has its ground in an infinite freedom.²⁹ It is perhaps useful, by way of parenthesis, to call attention to the fact that freedom enters the scene here in connection with ontology. A thorough consideration of the symbolic structure of human experience would also show the way in which the ontological foundation implies the self-fulfillment [*autocompimento*] of freedom, which thus appears as an intrinsic dimension of the original structure.³⁰ The question of freedom reveals, then, the intimate correlation between ontology and anthropology. The symbolic structure of experience, which entails an intrinsically dramatic anthropology, sheds light on the existential-enigmatic condition of man (*Dasein*), on account of which the human subject experiences itself as a thoroughly finite and contingent being that is nonetheless open to the infinite.³¹

Schwelle, especially 40–41).

²⁹Only the discovery of this ulterior theological difference enables us to shed light on the question of the origin of essences. The move to open the ontological difference to the theological difference frees us from having to derive essences from being. Their origin is rather to be found in the divine intelligence, which freely posits them in being by making them participate in its subsistent Being. The ontological difference becomes the locus of manifestation, the place of glory in metaphysics. But in order to be such it must, as an affirmation of the depth of being, be protected from reduction to necessity. It must remain an event (*Geschehen*) of absolute freedom that is therefore always open (cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Theologik*, vol. 2 [Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1983], 226, 231; id., *Epilog* [Trier: Johannes Verlag, 1987], 65). In this sense, difference is a sign of creatureliness and being appears as the manifestation of the glory of God. The fundamental theme of metaphysics will always be the sort of continual, wonder-filled rethinking of the "miracle" of being expressed in the famous question: *why is there being rather than nothing?* (On the question of wonder, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A, 928b.12f; Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d; M. Heidegger, *Was heißt Metaphysik?*; R. Vignolo, *H.U. von Balthasar: estetica e singolarità* [Milan, 1982], 168–90). We could map out a synthetic overview of the philosophical answers to this question, of which Parmenides and Heraclitus, along with their epigones, including those among us today, represent the two (unsatisfactory) extreme solutions.

³⁰For the development of this theme, see A. Bertuletti, "Sapere e libertà," in *L'evidenza e la fede*, 444–65.

³¹See the already classic reflections of H. de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 101–166.

Man is limited: he is, yet it is possible for him not to be. His essence has a limited modality of existence, which comes forth from the infinity and uni-totality of being without exhausting it. This fact of limitation is the root of man's questioning about the meaning of himself and of things. If man did not experience this limit and this openness to the unlimited, he would not wonder "Who am I?," "Where do I come from?," "Where am I going?," "Where does all that exists come from and what is its destination?"³² Mankind's religious and philosophical thought have their origin here. The religious sense is not something other than man's rational nature. On the contrary, it is the moment in which reason enters the domain of mystery and asks itself about the ultimate meaning of things, of destiny.

It is perhaps interesting to recall here that Guardini, in his essay "Phenomenology and Theory of Religion," also spoke of a *symbolic character of reality*, through which the absolute inscribes an unmistakable trace of itself in the structure of the ontological difference: "All things attest that they are directly real and essential: but they immediately make us sense that they are not the ultimate reality, but rather a passage through which what is truly ultimate and authentic emerges: they are expressive forms that manifest it."³³

³²It is impossible, in philosophical or pre-Christian terms, to give an adequate response that goes to the ultimate root of the question: Why does the world exist if God has absolutely no need of it? Philosophy can go only so far as the yearning question of revelation that Plato poses in a celebrated passage of the *Phaedo* (cf. A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 23–24). The oscillation between entities and being refers to an abyssal mystery that has no other ground than itself, that is, to an ultimate freedom. At the apex of the metaphysical (re)ascent, we discover that the ultimate origin of all entities is not the non-subsistent and impersonal fullness of the being of entities, but the subsistent fullness of a personal Being, of a "Thou." Pertinent in this regard is Lévinas's critique of Heidegger. For Heidegger, the mystery of being reduces to an impersonal event, the pure *es gibt* of the entity, the pure anonymous donation of it. Lévinas's rightly underscores the insufficiency of this aspect of Heidegger's thought, in which the living otherness of the person is completely lacking, inasmuch as it is absorbed by the neutral totality of the *Ereignis* [the event] of being as such (cf. A. Léonard, *Pensée des hommes et foi en Jésus Christ* [Paris, 1980], 292). The Magisterium of the Church has defined that human reason can truly and certainly know that there is a personal God by its own natural light (cf. DS 3875).

³³R. Guardini, "Fenomenologia e teoria della religione," in *Scritti filosofici*, vol. 2 (Milan: 1964), 207.

If our brief description of the trajectory of realism is accurate, then finite freedom, when its movement is inhibited by the sort of systematic refusal of the fundamental ontological question that characterizes, say, positivism or nihilistic skepticism à la Nietzsche and Heidegger, the dynamic of desire collapses (even granting that freedom is not denied in theory). Desire becomes fragmented in an exhausting and enfeebling quest for a satisfaction that embodies a prior refusal to travel the entire path to which the structure of the real nonetheless inexorably invites us.

b) The second constituent of freedom, which is commonly called "free choice" [*libero arbitrio*], is another area in which we see clear signs of the "crisis of desire." Given the limits of the present reflection, we will not enter into the specifics of this aspect of the question, which would require an analysis of the act of freedom in its constitutive relation to the subject of that act.³⁴ We limit ourselves instead to pointing out a characteristic phenomenon of our time and to offering a few basic reflections on the foundation of the freedom of choice.

It is no accident that one of the most common risks to which our time is prone is the tendency to identify the entire dynamic of freedom with the possibility of choice, which is only one of its elements, albeit an essential one.

On the one hand, we see the outcome of a certain line of thought, including a school of Catholic thought, that, having dismissed the *amor naturalis* (original desire) in its account of freedom, ends up defining it as indifference vis-à-vis various possibilities of choice.³⁵ On the other hand, we observe a much more popular tendency to reduce freedom to the continual possibility of choices that are guided ultimately by desire in a state of crisis, that is, of indefinite fragmentation. In both cases, freedom is reduced to the freedom of choice. But it should be noted that such a freedom, in order to remain permanently open to the satisfaction of limited desires, must in a certain sense close itself to any choice that would involve a stable relation and therefore a path towards the ultimate fulfillment of the "I."³⁶

³⁴R. Guardini, *Freedom, Grace, and Destiny*, 62–65.

³⁵See the work of S. Pinckaers, *Les sources de la morale chrétienne* (Fribourg, 1985), 244–57.

³⁶A proof of this is how the relationship of father to son is lived today. The tradition of Western thought offers us a text that has a great deal to say about this matter: The parable of the Prodigal Son. The three aspects of the

Freedom of choice thus becomes truncated freedom: it becomes a freedom "not to be bound," a pure freedom "from."

By contrast, the sort of Christian realism that we sketched above invites us to grasp man's freedom in a way that does justice to its original complexity.

It is here, I think, that we can usefully resort to the terminology that Balthasar deploys in his dramatic anthropology in order to give a grounding to the dimension of choice within the complex nature of freedom. For Balthasar argues that the finite freedom of man is constituted by an irreducible and inseparable polarity. On the one hand, it is freedom in the sense of self-movement, which of course entails the capacity to make choices out of an inalienable center of one's own. On the other hand, it is also, and at the same time, freedom as the capacity for consent [*assenso*].³⁷ The very capacity for choice on the basis of self-possession implies a moment of self-opening and transcendence, and, ultimately, of obedience. We therefore fail to understand freedom of choice deeply enough unless we see that it finally implies the necessity of decision as adherence

connection between paternity and freedom are simultaneously in play in the parable: desire-origin, choice-accompaniment on the chosen path, adhesion-truth of destiny. The experience of the father's mercy towards the prodigal son shows what paternity and sonship should be. As Ephesians 4:6 says, the fatherhood of God works in all things and is always present to all things in freedom. When the son says to the father, "Give me my portion, I am going off on my own," the father, who is at the origin, gives. The son goes off and squanders his heritage, he plays [*gioca*] his freedom. That is, he believes that his desire is going to be realized through a certain type of choice: By severing ties in order to go his own way. Then the crisis comes. He turns back. And the father's passion for his son's destiny is so great that he welcomes back the wretch who has despised and offended him. The father pardons the son because the desire to bring his son back to the path of his destiny—that is, to liberate his freedom—is stronger in him, the father, than any other. We can see here how, in a certain sense, fatherhood can attain the summit of tenderness. Cf. A. Scola, "Paternità e libertà," Inaugural Lecture for the program of Master in Pastorale matrimoniale e politica familiare (Fano, 3 July 1996).

³⁷Guardini himself makes the penetrating remark that freedom is to "take possession of oneself through mastery over one's actions," but then immediately adds that freedom in a definitive sense "cannot in fact be achieved except in dependence on God. Man is finite and finite being denotes dependence on God" (R. Guardini, *Freedom, Grace, and Destiny*, 80).

[adesione].³⁸ It is well to recognize that this second pillar has two aspects: it is the acknowledgment of one's structural openness to reality, but also recognition of the intrinsic necessity of adherence.

We could say that this tension between the two constitutive poles of finite freedom—which implies the exclusivity of one's own "I" with respect to other subjects (individuality) and, at the same time, the recognition that there can be an infinity of other finite freedoms (personhood)³⁹—is the anthropological attestation of the distinction that emerged from our investigation of the ontological structure of reality.⁴⁰

In this experience, in which finite freedom goes out of itself and therefore exercises a "being with" [*coessere*] in the company of other finite freedoms, the "I" perceives that no other finite freedom that it encounters can satisfy its capacity for a total adherence. Nothing of the reality of the "world" can be its ground and destiny.

Consent, then, means a recognition that to go out toward the other, which is a sign at once of need and of abundance, is to go out toward beings who are themselves endowed with a center of freedom capable of self-possession. Moreover, this openness to the other, which is a condition of one's own truth, is possible in the end only if we recognize an infinite freedom, the freedom of the mystery, of the Being upon which finite freedom depends for its existence as finite. Like a child in the arms of its mother, finite freedom is enveloped on every side by the loving freedom of the infinite.

For this reason, as Balthasar writes, "finite freedom as *autexousion*, as consent to oneself in the freedom of self-possession, is by no means alienated but rather inwardly fulfilled by consenting to that Being-in-its-totality which has now unveiled itself as that which freely grounds all things, as that which, in infinite freedom, creates finite freedom."⁴¹

³⁸"The first pillar of freedom is unequivocally 'given'; the second is both 'given' [*gegeben*] and 'laid upon us' [*aufgegeben*]. We are given the necessity (this is our 'thrown-ness, [*Geworfenheit*]) of going out from ourselves in order to make decisions and prove ourselves in the environment of our fellow men and fellow things. The manner and degree of our self-realization remain open" (H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, 212).

³⁹*Ibid.*, 208–209.

⁴⁰A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 84ff.

⁴¹H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, 242.

c) On the strength of what has been said, we can, I think, affirm that freedom of choice, grasped in its unity with the integral structure of the ontological desire that precedes it, can only be conceived as underway towards an ultimate point, a *telos*, which classical thought has called God. Contemporary theology, when it rigorously engages the complex theoretical vicissitudes of modern thought, also finally arrives at an analogous affirmation. That is, it comes to recognize the Triune God as the event in which the foundation that contains difference in perfect equality and thus "explains" the ontological difference (without exempting freedom from the task of decision) reveals itself in the symbolic evidence of faith. We must therefore recognize the third aspect that accounts for human freedom and that is freedom's only adequate object: The very mystery of God, one and three. He is the true mover of our freedom; our desire would remain unsatisfied and become lost in itself apart from this ultimate horizon. The only goal adequate to our nature is the infinite.

By way of summary, we could say, once again with Balthasar, that, in its experience of itself finite freedom realizes (and this realization is irreducible) that it is a "whence" (*woher*), that it is really given to itself, while its movement of self-opening enables it to lay hold of its own existence as a "whither" (*wohin*).⁴² For this reason, we understand the fundamental structure of finite freedom only insofar as we acknowledge an infinite freedom that, because it is absolutely self-grounding, can ground unlimited finite freedoms endowed with self-possession and the capacity for consent through relationship to the real.⁴³

We thus find ourselves far along into the second part of our presentation: The dynamism of human freedom is dramatically polarized towards its fulfillment. As such it raises the problem of an ultimate end, of a purpose, of a destiny that could present itself to the human heart as the adequate goal of man's action and adherence. Greek philosophy, especially Plato and Plotinus, had a certain intuition of this. But the intuition could not be carried through to the end, first because the mystery is structurally unknowable from below, but also because the

⁴²*Ibid.*, 209ff.

⁴³From the very outset, the human subject is opened up to infinite freedom, which alone can account for the enigma of man, by its primordial relationship with the "thou" that awakens it to consciousness: the mother's smile, in which being reveals itself as beautiful, good, and true (cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988], 114).

movement of finite freedom is marked by an ambivalent fragility. Finite freedom thus experiences a sort of redoubling of its dramaticity because of a congenital weakness that disposes it to treat the mystery as one *res* among others (idolatry).

A particular evidence of all of this is man's contradictory experience of his own creatureliness as a hopeless finitude, that is, as a "being for death," which seems in fact to contradict the desire that reality awakens in him.⁴⁴ "Being for death" appears to present freedom with an insurmountable obstacle to the attainment of its destiny. The daily emergence of death from within finite freedom shows up in what Balthasar calls the three polarities wherein man experiences his dramatic condition: spirit-body, man-woman, individual-community. Already at the level of the first and fundamental polarity, spirit-body, man is unable to strike a balance between the two poles, which are, after all, constantly threatened by the finitude of the subject, whose death consists in the separation of the spirit from the body. In consequence, the man-woman relationship itself remains caught in the "vicious circle" of death and generation, and even the individual seems to disappear in the collective because of his irremediable fleetingness.

All of this suggests that a good destiny for finite freedom can be experienced and guaranteed only where the ultimate mystery reveals itself, definitively showing, involving, and declaring itself. To be sure, the dynamic of the encounter between man's finite freedom and reality gives us a hint of a free, self-grounding mystery as the foundation and ultimate destiny of freedom. Nonetheless, we can experience this destiny's name, its turning towards human freedom, only through grace, that is, through a gratuitous, absolutely indeducible, absolutely singular event that comes about in history. In Jesus Christ, a presence appears in history with the "claim" [*pretesa*] to bear the definitive name of this mystery at the origin of things. In Jesus Christ we also encounter a subject who is fully human and at last aware of his own "whence" and "whither" and who therefore reveals himself as the fulfiller of man's destiny.

The task before us now is to see which Christian teaching in particular lights up the mystery of man and the path towards his destiny. We will examine, then, in what sense Jesus Christ himself, the way, the truth and the life, guarantees and gives a face to the destiny for which man perceives that he has been

⁴⁴See H.U. von Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, vol. 4, (Einsiedeln, 1983).

made. Moreover, we will consider how, within the horizon of the event of Christ, we can see human freedom itself in a new light, discovering that from the very beginning it was projected from within the same plan of grace that can assure its fulfillment.

II. Freedom in Grace: The Destiny to Become Sons in the Son

If we now consider our problem explicitly in the context of revelation, we realize that God's gracious self-giving to man happens precisely so that man might attain his fulfillment and be introduced into the life of God.⁴⁵ In the singular event of Christ we behold the total and infallible realization of the reciprocity between God and man and thus the accomplishment of God's original plan for creation. In Christ, man recognizes the possibility of reaching his fulfillment, which consists in his being introduced into the experience of divine sonship (cf. Eph 1:5-11).

In this sense, the objective center of our reflection becomes Jesus Christ himself, the incarnate Son of God, who died and rose again *propter nos* [for our sake], and who definitively brings to pass the reciprocity between finite and infinite freedom. In this vision, Jesus Christ, in his singularity,⁴⁶ appears as the infallible coming to pass of the Father's plan. In a particular way the paschal mystery accomplishes the covenant between God and man (the mutual pact between finite and infinite freedom) whose prehistory lies in the election of Israel as God's covenant partner in the Old Testament.

In the death and resurrection of Christ, God's plan of salvation comes about independently of the response of individual

⁴⁵Cf. *Dei Verbum*, 4. It would be very interesting to lay out the theoretical and methodological groundwork for a demonstration that, in order to make this step, we must overcome every kind of extrinsicism between reason and faith, in the conviction that "faith and reason generate each other simultaneously in an act whereby faith becomes critical." According to Bertuletti's summary account (see A. Bertuletti, "La 'ragione teologica' di Giuseppe Colombo. Il significato storico-teoretico di una proposta teologica," in *Teologia* 21 [1996]: 1, 18-36), this sentence captures the burden of Giuseppe Colombo's theological enterprise (see G. Colombo, *La ragione teologica* [Milan, 1985]).

⁴⁶On the question of the singularity of Jesus Christ, see A. Scola, *Questioni di antropologia teologica* (Milan: 1996), 9ff.

men.⁴⁷ Christ lives his mission and carries it out *pro nobis* [for us]⁴⁸ without the previous consent of finite freedom. "When we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (cf. Rom 5:6–10).

The Paschal mystery sets before our eyes how the incarnate Son of God, assuming a human nature like ours in all things, takes upon himself in obedience to the Father all the sins of men, thereby performing what the Fathers of the Church felicitously called the *admirabile commercium* [wondrous exchange].

Christ's eternal, filial, and eucharistic "Yes" to the mystery of his generation by the Father is inscribed in time by means of his mission. This "Yes" is able to take upon itself the whole "No" that finite freedom pronounces anti-eucharistically, thereby sinfully perverting its original structure, twisting the "whence" and the "whither" that define it into a "from self" and "toward self."

Christ thus brings about an exchange that ransoms finite freedom, wrests it from its self-closure [*autochiusura*], and, through the gift of the Holy Spirit whom the risen Christ gives to the Church, introduces it into the trinitarian life. In this way, the finite freedom of every human being is called to ratify personally the event of grace that Christ infallibly realizes for all.

The grace of God, which in essence is the person of Jesus Christ, carries out the universal plan of salvation. The possibility of attaining one's own destiny is given objectively and gratuitously to everyone in Christ. In him, God has realized his plan to have sons in the one Son. The Holy Spirit is the gift that springs forth from the Paschal mystery and enables finite freedom to adhere to what has been done once and for all in Christ. The tremendous mystery of finite freedom is that it can refuse the grace that envelops it and so can "miss" its own destiny.⁴⁹

We can now draw some conclusions for our theme from what has been said.

The approach that we have set forth suggests that finite freedom, in its integral dynamic, is not something closed and complete in itself to which grace would then be added as a

superadditum. Rather, the very structure of finite freedom is constitutively open to grace, that is, Christ himself, for finite freedom was conceived with Christ, indeed, with his death and resurrection, in mind. If, therefore, we keep in view the unity of the plan of salvation in Christ, we can, it seems, consider created freedom as in a certain sense a dimension (ingredient) of the supernatural, albeit one that remains permanently endowed with an autonomy of its own.

All of this forces us further to reflect on the fact that there is one and only one order and end of creation as a whole.⁵⁰ This enables us to overcome—christocentrically⁵¹—every consideration of created reality in terms of a double-end anthropology: "God undertook that first communication of his being, whereby finite, self-aware, free beings were created, with a view to a 'second' act of freedom whereby he would initiate them into the mysteries of his own life and freely fulfill the promise latent in the infinite act that realizes Being. This 'second' act does not need to be temporally distinct from the first. The final cause, since it is the first and all-embracing cause, includes all the articulations of the efficient cause—that is, the world's coming to be and God's becoming man"⁵²

In redeeming man, Christ makes him capable of his destiny. This same Christ now appears as the one in whom creation itself was brought into being and has its consistency: *Creation is therefore "in Christ"*⁵³ and he is its original mediator.

Moreover, to speak of creation "in Christ" and not only in the *Logos* is to take as our starting-point the all-embracing mission of Jesus of Nazareth. Since this mission coincides perfectly and "imprescogitably" [*imprescindibilmente*] with his person, it preexists creation itself. This notion is not meant to suggest a prenatal life of Jesus so much as an implication of his universally valid mission. The point, in other words, is to capture the christological dimension of creation as a whole. From the beginning, then, creation is the unfolding actualization of the covenant between God and man in Christ.

⁴⁷The return to the historical "figure" of Jesus of Nazareth is very much a live issue in the theological literature today. Cf. E.P. Sanders, *Gesù la verità storica* (Milan, 1993); R. Penna, *I ritratti originali di Gesù il Cristo* (Rome, 1996).

⁴⁸See M. Hengel, *Crocifissione ed espiazione* (Brescia, 1988), 178ff.

⁴⁹See S. Ubbiali, "Il peccato originale. L'esistenza dell'uomo e l'aporia del male," in *Questioni sul peccato originale* (Padua, 1996), 9–60.

⁵⁰Cf. A. Scola, *Questioni*, 135ff.

⁵¹On questions of Christocentrism see, G. Moio, *Cristologia. Proposta sistematica* (Milan, 1978), 43–56.

⁵²H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, 400f.

⁵³See A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 49f.

This brings us to the idea of *creation from the Trinity*,⁵⁴ to which St. Bonaventure and, in part, St. Thomas make explicit reference. Only a trinitarian God can be the creator of finite freedoms that are ontologically distinct from himself, but in such a way that they are neither due to a necessity on the part of the divine subject (in order to have someone to love or to explore his own possibilities; in himself he is already love in the mutual self-giving of the hypostases), nor the result of a primordial fall that would have caused them to come forth from the divine.

The creation of free finite beings is instead the production of an image of the triune God, a self-gift of the most holy Trinity. The difference and the relation between finite freedom and infinite freedom is therefore an image of the holy and infinite difference within the mystery of God himself. I mean the difference between the hypostases of the Father and the Son, a difference kept open and sealed by the fecundity of the Holy Spirit who proceeds from them both.

In the mystery of the grace of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, he who is the archetype (*Urbild*) and the "teletype" [*teletipo*] of created freedom unites himself to the derivative image (*Abbild*), purifies it, and introduces it into the infinite spaces of freedom within the holy mystery of God.

In conclusion: the entire dynamism of human freedom, through the impact of reality and the resultant attraction of the *amor naturalis*, reveals that man is constitutively ordered towards the search for his own fulfillment. We can therefore affirm that man is truly free when he is able to affirm his own freedom, not as an absolute autonomy, but as the capacity of adhering to the Triune God.

In this sense, man encounters the supreme possibility of being free, that is, of attaining his destiny, only when he encounters Christ. For Christ, being the Son of the eternal God who offered himself once and for all, has also made it possible for us to be sons in him.

The filial attitude of obedience to God thus fulfills, without simply overcoming, the polarities of finite freedom. In the *sequela Christi* [the following of Christ],⁵⁵ man experiences that death has been conquered and that his existence, the object of unceasing pardon, is already risen. He therefore experiences that the tension between spirit and body is brought into a definitive

⁵⁴See G. Marengo, *Trinità e creazione* (Rome, 1990).

⁵⁵See A. Scola, *Questioni*, 71–102.

harmony. The relationship between man and woman, grounded in the nuptiality of the sacrament of matrimony, appears as an initiation into the relationship between individual and community—whose mature form is the ecclesial *communio*.

Ultimately, then, the free person is the one who is a son, who recognizes God's paternity as a grace. All the dynamisms that characterize finite freedom find their final meaning here. The Church, born from the open side of Christ and drawing its life from the Spirit of freedom that the Lord has in common with the Father, appears as the locus of freedom and liberation for all men: the Church is the place of sonship.

The greatest charity that man needs today—as yesterday—is to encounter Christ. This encounter happens concretely through the ecclesial *communio*,⁵⁶ where we can experience—through grace—that freedom is accompanied on the way to its true destiny and where, in a word, we discover that we are no longer slaves, but sons (cf. Gal 4:7).—Translated by William Schmitt and Adrian Walker.* □

⁵⁶See A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 98.

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