

DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ— RESPONSE TO OBJECTIONS II

This is the second set of objections to the theses proposed in various articles published on this website critical of the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom. We set out first the objections, and then our responses.

THE OBJECTIONS

“It is impossible for natural freedom and freedom from coercion not to be really distinct.

“Natural freedom signifies either the power of free-will or an act of free-will. If we understand free-will to signify an act of free-will it is impossible for it not to be distinct from freedom from coercion. Two of the distinct acts of the free-will are *free choice* and *use*. *Free choice* or *election* is the act by which the will tends to something proposed to it as being good through being ordained to the intended end. *Use* is the act by which the will tends to the realization of the means chosen. For example, we might choose a stick as the suitable means by which we fend off an aggressive dog, but we must use the stick for it to be an effective means.

“Now, usually when we choose something as a means to an end we can proceed to put it into effect by an act of use. But sometimes when we have chosen the means we are unable to use it because we are prevented by some superior external force, that is, we are subjected to coercion. The coercion does not prevent us from choosing the means—it prevents our using the means. In the example, we intend to fend off the dog and we choose a stick as a suitable means of doing that. But just choosing a stick is not sufficient to keep the dog away; we have to use the stick to make it an effective means. If we both choose the means and use the means we can achieve our intended end. However, if an external force, such as the dog’s owner, prevents us using the stick, our defence is not realized. In both cases we have freedom of choice but in one case we have freedom from coercion and in the other case we don’t. But this is impossible if freedom of choice and freedom from coercion are the same reality. If they are the same reality they are necessarily present or absent together. So freedom of choice, or natural freedom, and freedom from coercion are really distinct.

“Similarly, if we understand free-will to signify a power of the soul whereby we are free to choose or not to choose this thing or that thing, it is impossible for it not to be distinct from freedom from coercion because while we always have that power to choose we do not always have freedom from coercion. So the man in jail does not have freedom from coercion yet he still has his natural freedom. If they were the same reality it would be impossible to separate them in this way. Therefore they are really distinct.”

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THE RESPONSES

The expression *freedom from coercion* is ambivalent. It may refer to a species of freedom. But the better interpretation of it—because ‘freedom from’ is synonymous with ‘absence of’—is ‘a state in which coercion is absent’. We will deal with this second interpretation first.

1. It is necessary to say something about the distinction between real and mental being. Unique in material creation, the human intellect has, for the sake of its operations, the power to give a certain being to the things it considers. This is not real being, but a being *secundum quid* (in a qualified sense)—mental being.

Man conceives of something in one of two manners,

- i. by an act of thought *without* foundation in the real; and
- ii. by an act of thought *with* foundation in the real.

Hence, we may conceive such objects as ‘square circle’, ‘rational brute’ or ‘curved space’. These are instances of mental being improperly so called—for they are mere figments of the mind. Or we may conceive of such objects as ‘blindness’, ‘darkness’, ‘evil’, or ‘privation’. These are based in the real and are instances of mental being properly so called. Only mental being based in the real like these can be the subject of rational study.

In every concept of the mind dealing with reality we must distinguish—

- that which we conceive of the thing—which is real being, for it exists in the very thing itself; and,
- the manner, or mode, in which we conceive it.

The manner in which we conceive it depends on the objective concept in the mind and may be diverse from the manner in which the same reality exists in the thing itself. For instance, ‘horse’, considered according to the mode of universality which it has in the mind as predicable of many individuals, cannot exist save in the mind. The external reality, horse, is the foundation or basis of the **relation** of this universal nature to the many individuals of which it is predicable.

Again, we can conceive of something and apply it mentally to things of which it is *not* in reality predicable. For instance we can apply the predicate ‘seeing’ to things that cannot see, such as the moon, a tree, or a blind man, but only with the acknowledgment that such a composition made (in the mind) does not befit the thing in the real. This acknowledgement is called **negation**.

The whole *be (esse)* of mental being consists in this, that it is known; i.e., its *be* is *be-known*. Thus mental being is not a thing, but a pure object. Because its very character consists in *incapability of real existence*, mental being can be constituted only of categories which satisfy this demand. There are only two, those mentioned above: **relation** because it is, in essence, *be-towards* some thing; and **negation** because its essence is *the absence of* some thing.

Now, that part of mental being which is **negation** does not consist in the lack of some form, for such lack is found in the real, negatively, as when light is lacking in the atmosphere; or when sight is lacking in a blind man; or when, contrary to one's expectation, no horse is found in a paddock containing various types of cattle. It consists, rather, in the fact that intellect *conceives the lack after the manner of a being*. Thus, it is not the lack of light which is mental being, but the intellect's conception of it as 'darkness'. It is not the lack of sight which is mental being, but the intellect's conception of it as 'blindness', or 'sightlessness'. Similarly, while the lack of a horse in the paddock is real being (negatively), if one were so to express it, the paddock's 'horselessness' would be mental being.

Now, *freedom from coercion* is a form of negation, for it denominates the lack of something, coercion—more properly 'the violent', defined by Aristotle as "that which proceeds from an extrinsic principle against the inclination of the subject." [*Ethics* iii, 1; and cf. St Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* II II. 175, resp.] The violent is, like light, like sight, something real; and its absence, like the absence of light, or sight, is likewise, something real, negatively. But *freedom from coercion* denominates that lack after the manner of a being: and just as there is no such reality as 'darkness', or 'sightlessness', neither is there any such reality as 'freedom from coercion', or, as it might be termed, 'coercionlessness'. It is only mental being; something of the mind.

Let us apply these considerations to the arguments raised by replacing 'freedom from coercion' with 'a lack of coercion': now they read as follows:

"If we both choose the means and use the means we can achieve our intended end. However, if an external force... prevents us... our defence is not realized. In both cases we have freedom of choice but in one case we have *a lack of coercion* and in the other case we don't. But this is impossible if [the act of] natural freedom and *a lack of coercion* are the same reality. If they are the same reality they are necessarily present or absent together. So freedom of choice, or natural freedom, and *a lack of coercion* are really distinct...

"Similarly, if we understand free-will to signify a power of the soul whereby we are free to choose or not to choose this thing or that thing, it is impossible for it not to be distinct from *a lack of coercion* because while we always have that power to choose we do not always have *a lack of coercion*. So the man in jail does not have *a lack of coercion* yet he still has his natural freedom. If they were the same reality it would be impossible to separate them in this way. Therefore they are really distinct."

The arguments so modified are valid; the points they make, to be conceded. For a reality is matched against a reality—or more correctly, a positive reality is matched against a negative. On their original premises, however, the arguments fail, for against a reality (natural freedom) they match a mental abstraction, a negative conceived after the manner of a being ('coercionlessness').

The issue may be illustrated with the parallel case of vision (taken either as the *power* or the *act* of sight) and the lack of a blindfold.¹ The lack of a blindfold is a (negative) reality. The *act* of sight and the lack of a blindfold are really distinct; as

¹ With its balancing against a positive reality of a negative reality, this analogy is clumsy; but so is the case embodied in the argument.

are the *power* of sight and the lack of a blindfold, because the man who “does not have the lack of a blindfold” (to express the issue in so oblique a fashion) yet retains his power of sight. If we substitute for the (negative) reality, “lack of a blindfold”, the mental abstraction “state of freedom from a blindfold”, or “blindfoldlessness”, the contrasts that ensue hardly make sense.

Now the critic’s purpose was to show that the Council Fathers did not err when they claimed that the right to religious freedom—

“means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs...”

—and that in doing so they identified a reality, a species of freedom, distinct from man’s natural freedom. He may argue, then, that in defending *freedom from coercion*, he was relying on the reality, ‘a lack of coercion’, and insist that since *freedom from coercion* is founded on a reality, contrary to what has been advanced here, it is itself a reality. This brings us to the second point.

2. The alternative interpretation of *freedom from coercion*, that it signifies a species of freedom, also reduces to mental being. Since man’s freedom is comprehended exhaustively by the *power* of free will (in which the *acts* of free will are virtually contained), there is no other reality to which *freedom from coercion* could refer. It follows that if it is distinct from *natural freedom*, it is so only conceptually. The issue might be put in the form of a syllogism:

Freedom from coercion is identical with *natural freedom* relieved of impediment to the will’s act.

But, *natural freedom* relieved of impediment to the will’s act is *natural freedom simpliciter*.

Therefore, *freedom from coercion* is identical with *natural freedom*.

3. The objections having thus been answered, we insist that the category of freedom to which the Council Fathers sought to appeal in *Dignitatis Humanae*—*freedom from coercion*—exists only in mind. Since rights attach to realities and not to mental abstractions, it follows that the rights allegedly embodied in the expression *freedom from coercion* do not exist.

Michael Baker

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