
CONSCIENCE AND FREE-WILL IN SAINT JOHN OF DAMASCUS

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(Received 25 October 2013)

Abstract

This paper exposes the concepts of conscience, will and human freedom in Saint John of Damascus's opinion, who made in the 8th century the first synthesis of teaching of the Christian faith. Like the Fathers who preceded him, all the anthropological concepts of St John are based on the Biblical creation of man 'in the image' of God. This is why the human beings possess reason, feelings, consciousness and free will. The way the man is structured, shows however the purpose for which he was created: to exercise his conscience and the freedom to choose good, to unite with God by his own will. Finally, there are references to the relevance of the vision of Saint John of Damascus on the consciousness of the contemporary man.

Keywords: conscience, free-will, freedom, Saint John of Damascus

1. Introduction

Related to the ecumenical influence of Saint John of Damascus, A. Louth wrote: „St John of Damascus forms a strange, though by no mean exceptional, case in the history of Christian theology. His influence is far-reaching, not only in later Byzantine theology, where eventually the pattern of John's theological synthesis became determinative, but also in later Western theology, beginning with the great Summae of the scholastic theologians, from whom his epitome of patristic doctrine (known in the West as *De Orthodoxa Fide*, 'On the Orthodox Faith') became their principal resource for the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines defined by the Oecumenical Synods of the early Church and continuing through the Reformation era and the period of Protestant scholasticism, up to the systematic theology of the great Romantic theologian Schleiermacher.” [1] This great influence both in the East and the Christian West, occurs due to his exceptional work of systematization and synthesis of the entire patristic literature written up to him [2-4]. He meditated on it and exposed it concisely, selecting and formulating in a classic way the dogmas of the Orthodox Church [5]. Thus, Saint John of Damascus “was a man of vast culture, but his genius resides in the fact that he filtered all the material he had studied through his soul as a devout Christian who does not cross the boundaries of the

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Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition. All his works show a taste for selection and order. The theologian poet or the poet theologian, who arranged the verses in metric patterns without damaging either the melodicy or the dogmatic sense, can also be seen in the meticulous composition of all his writings. Saint John of Damascus had the gift to choose, to summarize and to compose.” [6] He proved great clarity in formulating the truths of faith, having a special talent to present in short summaries the most important Christian teachings and, most of all he knew how to appreciate the authority of each Holy Father [7].

Saint John of Damascus’ attempt to synthesize the patristic teaching we wrote about above, is conclusively reflected in his analysis of the anthropological doctrine. It is placed in his Dogmatic (Part III of *Expositio Fidei Orthodoxae*) in accordance with the scheme of a ‘classic’ textbook nowadays, in the *The Second Book* (the first one being dedicated to the considerations about the Holy Trinity and the attributes of God) immediately after the presentation of the creation of the other elements of the seen and unseen world.

His considerations about man are based on the teachings of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus and Nemesius of Emesa [1, p. 133]. For example, when exposing the attributes that man is endowed with by virtue of His creation ‘in the image and likeness’ of God, Saint John of Damascus says almost recites a long passage from the work of Gregory of Nazianzus [8]. Next we will analyze the most important elements of this anthropological concept, focusing on the terms of conscience, will and free will.

2. Created in God’s Image

Like his predecessors, Saint John of Damascus places the human creation under the divine reference in Genesis 1.26, that of creation in the ‘image and likeness’ of God, trying to define these basic characteristics of the human being through ‘mind and free will’ (‘after His image’), or „in virtue so far as that is possible” („after His likeness”) [9]. The constitution of man as a being made of body and soul is criticized here and Origen’s opinion about the ‘pre-existence’ of the souls, which states that the body and soul were not made simultaneously—places him in the ‘middle’ of creation (as a micro-cosmos) participating both in the spiritual and in the material world in the present life, his life is ordered as an animal’s, but elsewhere, that is, in the age to come, he is changed and becomes deified. The greatness of man is the ultimate goal that he was called to and toward which he incessantly aspire – deification „in the way of participating in the divine glory and not in that of a change into the divine being” [9, coll. 924].

Assessing the iconic constitution of the human being, Saint John of Damascus reveals that the fact that man was created free from sin and by the free will of God entails the participation in the divine attributes; although he is able to sin, man does not have this capability in their nature, but more in his free will. As “there is no virtue in what is the result of mere force”, the man had the power to remain and progress in good, aided by divine grace, as he had the

power to turn from good and fall into decay, which is permitted (not wanted!) by God precisely due to the human capacity to exercise free will.

Thus, human value derives from the original elements which related the person to his Creator or, more precisely, through the soul. It is defined as „living essence, simple, incorporeal, invisible in its proper nature to bodily eyes, immortal, reasoning and intelligent, formless, making use of an organised body, and being the source of its powers of life, and growth, and sensation, and generation”; „it enjoys freedom and volition and energy, and is mutable, that is, it is given to change, because it is created” [9, coll. 924]. (Avoiding the trichotomy formulations, Saint John of Damascus admits that he is the adept of dichotomism, saying that the spirit is not of another nature than the soul ‘but its purest part’, similar to the function of the eye in the body.)

Therefore, if existential freedom is a fundamental attribute of the human soul, the same can be said about its rational and conscious ability. Man is a microcosm and „man’s reason unites him to the incorporeal and intelligent natures, for he applies his reason and mind and judgment to everything and pursues after virtues and eagerly follows after piety, which is the crown of the virtues”. [9, coll. 924]

Extremely interesting is the analysis that Saint John of Damascus assigns to the specific functions of the soul and body: „piety and thought are the peculiar properties of the soul. And the virtues are common to soul and body, although they are referred to the soul as if the soul were making use of the body”. [9, coll. 924] In their turn, the powers of the soul are divided in that which has reason and that which is without reason; which has reason and that which is without reason. Saint John of Damascus explains that: „the forces again, inherent in a living creature are ... partly psychical, partly vegetative, partly vital. The psychical forces are concerned with free volition, that is to say, impulsive movement and sensation. Impulsive movement includes change of place and movement of the body as a whole, and phonation and respiration. For it is in our power to perform or refrain from performing these acts (in other words they act within the conscience - author’s note). The vegetative and vital forces, however, are quite outside the province of will. The vegetative, moreover, include the faculties of nourishment and growth and generation and the vital power is the faculty of pulsation. For these go on energising whether we will it or not (they are thus related to the biological aspect and not rationality and consciousness, author’s note).” [9, coll. 929]

3. Human consciousness and its role

Without going into detail on the relationship between good and evil, pleasure and pain, in all the complexity of its aspects or bodily powers (senses), we will stop at ‘the faculty of thought’ of the man, which coincides in the thinking of Saint John of Damascus with consciousness. This statement proves its validity if we compare it with what he writes about ‘the faculty of thought’: it „deals with judgments and assents, and impulse to action and disinclinations and

escapes from action: and more especially with thoughts connected with what is thinkable and the virtues and the different branches of learning and the theories of the arts and matters of counsel and choice” [9, coll. 937]. (The functions of the consciousness: knowledge, enlightening, evaluation and revelation are rendered here.) Then it is showed how consciousness relies on its power to memorize and its rational character, whether or not expressed in words: „Conception is an activity of the soul originating in the reason without resulting in utterance. Accordingly, often, even when we are silent we run through a whole speech in our minds and hold discussions in our dreams. And it is this faculty chiefly which constitutes us all reasoning beings. For those who are dumb by birth or have lost their voice through some disease or injury, are just as much reasoning beings. But articulation by voice or in the different dialects requires energy: that is to say, the word is articulated by the tongue and mouth and this is why it is named articulation. It is, indeed, the messenger of thought and it is because of it that we are called speaking beings” [9, coll. 940].

But how is the rational, conscious activity of man reflected toward the good or evil? To this question Saint John of Damascus tries to answer by presenting the relationship between passion and spiritual activity. (Defined by intrinsic dynamics, human will is outlined by Andrew Louth based on the thinking of Saint John of Damascus as: „willing – wishing – enquiry and consideration – counsel and deliberation – judgement – inclination/disposition – choice/selection – impulse – use” [1, p. 139].) If passion is negative, contrary to nature („passion is an animal affection which is succeeded by pleasure anti pain”), energy is positive, that is natural („energy is a movement in harmony with nature”) [9, coll. 940-941]. To better express this implicit interrogation, Saint John of Damascus distinguishes then between the faculties of knowledge – mind (*νοϋς*), thought (*διανοια*), notion (*δοξα*), presentation (*φαντασις*), sensation (*αισθησις*) – and the vital or appetitive faculties – will (*βουλησις*) *si* choice (*προαιρεσις*) – and explains the way in which the first powers are exercised: „It is sensation that causes a passion (*παθος*), which is called presentation, to arise in the soul, and from presentation comes notion. Thereafter thought, weighing the truth or falseness of the notion, determines what is true and this explains the Greek word for thought, which is derived from *διανοειν* = to think and *διακρινειν* = to discriminate. That, however, which is judged and determined to be true, is spoken of as mind. Or to put it otherwise: The primary activity of the mind, observe, is intelligence (*νοησις*), but intelligence applied to any object is called a thought (*εννοια*) and when this persists and makes on the mind an impression of the object of thought, it is named reflection (*ενθυμησις*) and when reflection dwells on the same object and puts itself to the test and closely examines the relation of the thought to the soul, it gets the name prudence (*φρονησις*). Further, prudence, when it extends its area forms the power of reasoning (*διαλογισμος*) and is called conception (*ενδιαθετος λογος*) and this is defined as the fullest activity of the soul arising in that part where reason resides and being devoid of outward expression and from it proceeds the uttered word spoken by the tongue (*προφορικος λογος*).” [9, coll. 944-945]

4. Human will

The essential theme of our study is the presentation of the vital powers of the soul or ‘will’ (θελησις), a word which relates to ‘natural will’ (θελημα) – „an appetite, both rational and vital, depending only on what is natural” – and to ‘will’ (δοθλησις) – „the natural and vital and rational appetite of all things that go to constitute nature, that is, just the simple faculty”. If will is ‘vital and rational appetite of things’, it is always related to something concrete, as suggested in a Spielwort by Saint John of Damascus: „The wish, then, has reference to the end alone and not to the means by which the end is attained. The end is the object of our wish (το δουλητον), for instance, to be a king or to enjoy good health, but the means by which the end is attained, that is to say, the manner in which we ought to enjoy good health, or reach the rank of king, are the objects of deliberation (το δοθλευτον). Then, after wish follow inquiry and speculation and after these, if the object is anything within our power, comes counsel or deliberation (δουλευσις)” [9, coll. 942]. This process continues until everything is accomplished: „counsel is an appetite for investigating lines of action lying within our own power. For one deliberates, whether one ought to prosecute any matter or not and next, one decides which is the better and this is called judgment (κρισις). Thereafter, one becomes disposed to and forms a liking for that in favour of which deliberation gave judgment and this is called inclination (γνωμη). For, should one form a judgment and not be disposed to or form a liking for the object of that judgment, it is not called inclination. Then, again, after one has become so disposed, choice or selection (επιλογη) comes into play. For choice consists in the choosing and selecting of one of two possibilities in preference to the other. Then one is impelled to action and this is called impulse (ορμη): and thereafter it is brought into employment and this is called use (χρησις). The last stage after we have enjoyed the use is cessation from desire” [9, coll. 942-945]

After demonstrating that freedom is one of the features of human will - „For his actions are free and depend upon reason, since the faculties of knowledge and life are bound up together in man. He is free in desire, free in wish, free in examination and investigation, free in deliberation, free in judgment, free in inclination, free in choice, free in impulse and free in action where this is in accordance with nature” [9, coll. 945] -, in another Spielwort Saint John of Damascus highlights the difference between the subjective (personal) aspect and the objective (ontologic) aspect of will: „Further note, that will (θελησις) and wish (δουλησις) are two different things: also the object of will (το θελητον) and the capacity for will (το θελητικον) and the subject that exercises will (οθελων), are all different”. And again: „The word θελημα, it is well to note, sometimes denotes the will (θελησις) that is, the volitional faculty and in this sense we speak of natural will (θελημαφυσικον): and sometimes it denotes the object of will (τοθελητον) and we speak of will (θελημαγνωμηκον).” [9, coll. 945]

At this point in his argument, Saint John of Damascus refers briefly to the will of Jesus Christ, stating that in this case one cannot talk about deliberation and preference „Nor in the case of the soul of the Lord do we speak of counsel or choice, seeing that He had no part in ignorance. For, although He was of a nature that is not cognisant of the future, yet because of His oneness in subsistence with God the Word, He had knowledge of all things and that not by grace, but, as we have said, because He was one in subsistence. For He Himself was both God and Man and hence He did not possess the will that acts by opinion (το θελητον) or disposition. While He did possess the natural and simple will which is to be observed equally in all the personalities of men, His holy soul had not opinion (or, disposition) that is to say, no inclination opposed to His divine will, nor aught else contrary to His divine will. For opinion (or, disposition) differs as persons differ, except in the case of the holy and simple and uncompound and indivisible Godhead.” [9, coll. 948]

Andrew Louth shows that distinguishing between person (ὑποστασις) and nature (ουσια), that is between natural will and free will (γνωμη), Saint John of Damascus follows Saint Maximus the Confessor and tries to highlight the relationship between divine will and human will in Christ [1, p. 139]. In St. John of Damascus' opinion, Lord had two natural wills, but only one gnostic will, while Maxim used the term 'gnomic will' to indicate a deliberative will, which not present neither in God nor in the incarnate Son of God [10-13].

Saint John of Damascus reiterates then the role of energy to be „the natural force and activity of each essence”: „For energy is ... the activity innate in every essence... Natural energy again is the force in each essence by which its nature is made manifest. And again: natural energy is the primal, eternally-moving force of the intelligent soul: that is, the eternally-moving word of the soul, which ever springs naturally from it. And yet again: natural energy is the force and activity of each essence which only that which is not lacks” [9, coll. 949-952]. Saint John of Damascus makes then the connection to the exposure about the distinction between voluntary and involuntary and at the end of his anthropological teaching he refers to the free will.

5. Voluntary and involuntary – Free will

From the beginning it must be said that action is a rational activity, followed by praise or blame, committed either with pleasure or pain, where it appears that some actions are desired, others are avoided by the one who commits them. „The voluntary implies a certain definite action, and so-called involuntariness also implies a certain definite action. Further, many attribute true involuntariness not only to suffering, but even to action. We must then understand action to be rational energy. Actions are followed by praise or blame, and some of them are accompanied with pleasure and others with pain; some are to be desired by the actor, others are to be shunned: further, of those that are desirable, some are always so, others only at some particular time. And so it is also with those that are to be shunned. Again, some actions enlist pity and are

pardonable; others are hateful and deserve punishment. Voluntariness, then, is assuredly followed by praise or blame, and renders the action pleasurable and desirable to the actor, either for all time or for the moment of its performance. Involuntariness, on the other hand, brings merited pity or pardon in its train, and renders the act painful and undesirable to the doer, and makes him leave it in a state of incompleteness even though force is brought to bear upon him." [9, coll. 953]

There are some concrete examples („For, if one commits murder while drunk, it is an act of ignorance, but yet not involuntary: for one was one's self responsible for the cause of the ignorance, that is to say, the drunkenness. But if while shooting at the customary range one slew one's father who happened to be passing by, this would be termed an ignorant and involuntary act"), reminiscent of casuistry, one draws the conclusion that involuntary act is committed in two ways: one depending on force, the other on ignorance. The voluntary act, on the contrary, is committed neither by force nor by ignorance. „A voluntary act, then, is one of which the beginning or cause originates in an actor, who knows each through which and in which the action takes place" [9, coll. 953]. But what are these 'individual circumstances'? Saint John of Damascus writes that they are given the name 'the rhetoricians' and 'circumstantial elements' and refer to who, that is the doer; whom, that is the one who suffered the action; what, that is what has been done, for example: has killed; what with, that is with what the instrument; where, that is the place; when, that is what time; how, that is the way; what for, that is for what purpose.

Other examples (for instance, to escape shipwreck we cast the cargo overboard) suggest us that there are some acts between the voluntary and the involuntary ones - accepted, although unpleasant and painful in order to avoid a greater evil - and acts made voluntarily, and yet not by choice - for example, a friend comes unexpectedly and his coming is voluntary to us, but not by our choice. Or, we happen to find a treasure, we come across it voluntarily, but not by choice. These are all voluntary acts, because we enjoy them, but not through choice, because they are not committed by deliberation.

„The first enquiry involved in the consideration of free-will – continues Saint John of Damascus - that is, of what is in our own power, is whether anything is in our power: for there are many who deny this. The second is, what are the things that are in our power, and over what things do we have authority? The third is: what is the reason for which God Who created us endued us with free-will?" [9, coll. 956-960]

The opinion of those who believe that human conduct is a cause outside is thus invalidated: either God, or necessity, or fate, or nature, or chance, or accident. („But God's function has to do with essence and providence: necessity deals with the movement of things that ever keep to the same course: fate with the necessary accomplishment of the things it brings to pass (for fate itself implies necessity): nature with birth, growth, destruction, plants and animals; chance with what is rare and unexpected" [9, coll. 961].) For it would not be right to ascribe to God actions that are sometimes base and unjust; also, „nor

may we ascribe these to necessity, for they are not such as ever continue the same: nor to fate, for fate implies not possibility only but necessity: nor to nature, for nature's province is animals and plants: nor to chance, for the actions of men are not rare and unexpected: nor to accident, for that is used in reference to the casual occurrences that take place in the world of lifeless and irrational things". In conclusion: „We are left then with this fact, that the man who acts and makes is himself the author of his own works, and is a creature endowed with free-will" [9, coll. 961].

In support of his allegations, but on a different perspective, Saint John of Damascus proves that if man is not in any way the principle of his action, he would not have any reason to possess the faculty to deliberate. „If man is the author of no action – John of Damascus wonders – the faculty of deliberation is quite superfluous for to what purpose could deliberation be put if man is the master of none of his actions? For all deliberation is for the sake of action. But to prove that the fairest and most precious of man's endowments is quite superfluous would be the height of absurdity" [9, coll. 961]

Chapter 26 of the Second Book, distinguishes between events that are in our power and those who are not: „Those then are in our hands which we are free to do or not to do at our will, that is all actions that are done voluntarily (for those actions are not called voluntary the doing of which is not in our hands), and in a word, all that are followed by blame or praise and depend on motive and law. Strictly all mental and deliberative acts are in our hands." [9, coll. 957]

Deliberation 'is concerned with equal possibilities' namely those which involve contrary acts. The choice for or against is made by our brain, which is the principle of action. „The actions, therefore, that are in our hands are these equal possibilities: e.g. to be moved or not to be moved, to hasten or not to hasten, to long for unnecessaries or not to do so, to tell lies or not to tell lies, to give or not to give, to rejoice or not to rejoice as fits the occasion, and all such actions as imply virtue or vice in their performance, for we are free to do or not to do these at our pleasure. Amongst equal possibilities also are included the arts, for we have it in our power to cultivate these or not as we please" [9, coll. 961].

The next chapter, entitled *Concerning the reason of our endowment with Free-will* brings in the centre of discussions the strong relationship between reason, conscience and free will. Assuming that "those things must be subject to change whose production has its origin in change" it is shown that things without reason undergo the aforementioned bodily changes, while the changes of things endowed with reason depend on choice. For reason consists of a speculative and a practical part. The speculative part is the contemplation of the nature of things, and the practical consists in deliberation and defines the true reason for what is to be done. The speculative side is called mind or wisdom, and the practical side is called reason or prudence. Every one, then, who deliberates does so in the belief that the choice of what is to be done lies in his hands, that he may choose what seems best as the result of his deliberation and having chosen may act upon it. And if this is so, free-will must necessarily be

very closely related to reason. For either man is an irrational being, or, if he is rational, he is master of his acts and endowed with free-will.

If the irrational does not have free will, being led by nature and the natural desire not rejecting natural will, endowed with free will, man is the ‘the master of his deeds’ a rational being who leads the nature more than he is led by it – „he has the power to curb his appetite or to indulge it as he pleases” – therefore he is responsible.

Saint John of Damascus concludes this brief but important chapter showing that angels - as created and changeable beings, endowed with reason, are also endowed with free will. Moreover, the negative example of the uses contrary to nature is the devil. It was created to be good, but by virtue of free will, he and the powers that have apostatized with it - that is demons -, became ‘the inventor of evil’, while the other bands of angels persisted for the better.

Finally, in the next chapter, Saint John of Damascus exemplified by the fall of Adam the negative exercise of free will in the human being, which resulted in death and cannot therefore be attributed to God.

6. Conclusions

“The most important scientific discovery of our time will be made if a person or a group of researchers will find the answer to the following question: How exactly is consciousness caused by the neurobiological processes in the brain?” [14] This question shows the importance and mostly, the dilemmas posed by the psycho-physio-philosophical analysis of consciousness for researchers today. Addressing issues related to the subjective reality, the nature of self and soul, free will and determination of decision, the guidelines of this research can be schematized as “variants of naturalism or physicalism, which tend to reduce the mind and consciousness to bodily functions (functionalism) that is neural (connectionism) or environmental influences (contextualism) and variants of mentalist or emergentist holism, which show a psycholinguistics structure and irreducible intentional behavior as well as an interaction of cognitive and social factors in the construction of mental acts” [14].

Despite the apparent complexity, in reality these approaches to conscience failed to provide a valid answer to the problem involving human consciousness. Ambiguity is missing entirely from the Christian patristic vision of man as revealed by the presentation of the one who systematized this teaching in the 8th century Saint John of Damascus - one of the giants of Christian theology [15]. (His work is all the more remarkable considering the socio-historical context in which he lived [16].) It is still to see to what extent the Medical science, Psychology, Sociology or Anthropology will accept the entire Christian doctrine about man - that is, that man is not reduced to one of his psychosomatic functions, but is portrayed in his true size, a creature akin to other creatures, but also to his Creator, God.

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