

# WHAT IS PECULIAR TO HUMAN BEINGS IS NOT REASON BUT FREE VOLITION \*

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ABSTRACT: My claim is that human beings are rational agents but they can not be *defined* as *the* rational agents. Cognitive sciences (psychology and neuroscience, and also artificial intelligence) tell us that some animals and some machines are rational agents as well. In my opinion the most characteristic feature of women and men is not their rational dimension but their volitional dimension, that is, their aspect of being free agents. It is precisely in this volitional aspect where we find the mental processes that very likely are non-physical (and perhaps spiritual).

KEY WORDS: free volition, self-consciousness, plan of life, cognitive sciences.

## *Lo peculiar de los seres humanos no es la razón, sino la voluntad libre*

RESUMEN: Mi tesis es que los seres humanos son agentes racionales pero no pueden ser *definidos* como *los* agentes racionales. Las ciencias cognitivas (psicología y neurociencia, y también la inteligencia artificial) nos dicen que algunos animales y algunas máquinas son asimismo agentes racionales. En mi opinión el rasgo más característico de mujeres y hombres no es su dimensión racional sino su dimensión volicional, es decir, su aspecto de ser agentes libres. Es precisamente en este aspecto volicional donde encontramos los procesos mentales que muy probablemente son no-físicos (y quizás espirituales).

PALABRAS CLAVE: volición libre, autoconciencia, plan de vida, ciencias cognitivas.

I. There is a long tradition, in which Sir Anthony Kenny is apparently included<sup>1</sup>, according to which human beings should be *defined* as *the* rational animals. On this matter Aristotle (384-322 BC) is well-known because, in his writings about psychology, ethics and political philosophy<sup>2</sup>, he defends and justifies this definition of human beings. Aristotle was first of all a biologist and as such he thought that men and women should be considered animals, and he also thought that psychology has much to do with biology. But at the same time he put forward that reason is the most peculiar characteristic to human beings since reason provides them with the perfect happiness. Nevertheless, it seems to me that reasoning does not produce necessarily happiness and that most people do not like to reason.

This definition of human beings as rational animals has lasted up to our own times, by means of medieval philosophers and particularly by means of Porphyry. This philosopher lived in the III century A. D. and was an eclectic thinker, because being in the mainstream of Plotinus he paid much attention to Aristotle. As a result of this attention he wrote an introduction (*Isagoge*) to the Aristotelian *Categories*; in this brief work<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See KENNY'S, ANTHONY, «Human Beings», Gorizia, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> SMITH, J. A. - ROSS, W. D. (eds.), *The Works of Aristotle translated into English*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1908-1952.

<sup>3</sup> *Isagoge*, translation into French and notes by J. Tricot, Vrin, Paris, 1947.

Porphyry presents the relation of subordination that holds among the general terms from «substance» to «man». This presentation, known later as «Porphyrian Tree», characterizes man as the rational animal. And indeed Porphyry's *Isagoge* became a standard medieval textbook and even later was a classic book in education. In this way the definition of human beings as the rational animals was officially established in the western civilization.

Also in our own times cognitive sciences (psychology and neuroscience, and artificial intelligence as well) defend that there is no ground to reserve reason for human beings nor, therefore, to put forward that the most peculiar characteristic to humans is reason. Certainly cognitive sciences very often and in a natural way talk about animal reason or intelligence, and also about mechanical reason or intelligence, in addition to human reason or intelligence. In principle we could distinguish between reason (passing from the understanding of one thing to the understanding of another thing) and intelligence (immediate grasp of a truth), but I will not make this distinction because, following Aquinas, reason and intelligence cannot be different powers in human beings, as Anthony Kenny has appropriately remarked<sup>4</sup>.

Anyway the main issue regarding intelligence or reason is its adequate notion. Psychologists have offered several conceptions, such as capacity of adaptation to environment, ability to learning, speed for mental processing, or capacity for problem solving<sup>5</sup>. In my opinion we should try to find a broad notion that could be shared by psychologists and computer scientists and, in this case, the best candidate for an adequate notion of intelligence or reason is the capacity for problem solving, which is up with the capacity to draw inferences, in such a manner that intelligent processes are basically inferential processes.

A problem for an agent is a difficulty that appears to him, in his ordinary activity or in his speculative activity (if he has a speculative life), whose solution is not provided by reflexive or innate resources, and moreover the solution is not obvious, since it is something still to be discovered or there are several possible solutions. Certainly, from the point of view of cognitive sciences, the agent can be a human, but also an animal or a computer. I think that the capacity for problem solving is a clear and definite criterion for intelligence, to the extent that an agent is more intelligent than other, with regard to a kind of task, whether he solves a superior number of problems and in a better way than the other does. Therefore intelligent processes are a kind of mental processes that produce solutions to problems.

In an inevitable way (because we are determined to think from a human mind), the human intelligence is the paradigm or model of intelligence. When we attribute intelligent processes to animals, like rats, cats, dogs, horses or chimps, we are establishing an analogy with the human intelligence. And likewise the attribution of intelligent processes to some computers or to some robots establishes an analogy with the human intelligent processes. In general we say that an animal or a machine are intelligent in the case that they accomplish tasks that, when accomplished by humans, we esteem a product of human intelligence.

The attribution of intelligence to some animals is usually accepted by psychologists, it is acknowledged with enthusiasm by pets owners, and it is often admitted by philosophers of mind. I will confine myself to citing two classic texts. First the book by the cognitive ethologist Donald Griffin (1915-2003) *Animal Minds*<sup>6</sup>, where he presents a lot of cases

<sup>4</sup> KENNY, ANTHONY, *Aquinas on Mind*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, STERNBERG, ROBERT - DETTERMANN, DOUGLAS (eds.), *What is Intelligence?* (1986).

<sup>6</sup> The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

and experiments about animal intelligence. And second the work by the ethologist and neuroscientist Lesley Rogers *Minds of their own. Thinking and awareness in animals*<sup>7</sup>, where she defends not only the existence of intelligence in some animals but also the existence in them of consciousness.

Nevertheless the attribution of intelligence to some computers and to some robots has set off a long and passionate debate. We can notice three main positions with regard to this issue. Firstly the thesis supported by the philosopher Hubert Dreyfus<sup>8</sup>, who insists on saying that artificial intelligence is a fraud. Secondly the stance argued by John Searle (another philosopher)<sup>9</sup> establishing that computers only can simulate the human intelligence. And finally the claim put forward by the cognitive scientist Marvin Minsky<sup>10</sup>, who thinks that some computers and robots (appropriately programmed) *are* really intelligent. In my opinion<sup>11</sup> it is plain that there exists artificial intelligence, since there are intelligent machines, that is, machines with programs to carry out tasks which, when carried out by humans, we consider a result of human intelligence; for example, machines to prove difficult theorems, to diagnose and to treat illnesses, or to solve very complex mathematical equations. It is frequently said that the intelligence of computers is something put in them by their programmers, but we should consider the following points. The programmers of Deep Blue were not able to win Kasparov at playing chess but this computer program was able to win him; in the same way that the parents of Einstein were not able to discover the theory of relativity but Einstein was. And as it is well-known machine learning is an important and active branch in artificial intelligence. Anyway it is also plain that although some machines can match and even overcome, in certain tasks, the human intelligence they cannot match humans in all their intelligent tasks; for example in abductive inferences or in non-monotonic reasonings.

Summing up I think that we cannot go on defending that reason or intelligence is the most peculiar characteristic to human beings or, in other words, although humans are rational agents they can not be *defined as the* rational agents.

II. To the best of my knowledge the most characteristic feature of women and men is not their rational dimension but their volitional dimension, that is, their aspect of being free agents. It is precisely in this volitional aspect where we find the mental processes that very likely are non-physical (spiritual). And it is very important to remark that we find these possibly non-physical mental processes by means of a scientific, particularly psychological, analysis. This remark is very important because I think, like Aquinas, that there are not two truths, one philosophical and another theological, but that the truth is one.

Firstly we find free volitions. We have to distinguish between simple or deterministic volitions and free or indeterministic volitions. My wish of having lunch after a very busy morning is a deterministic volition, because this wish is determined by my hunger, whereas my decision to make a hunger strike is a free volition. Besides extreme cases of free volitions which are contrary to the determination of the stimuli or contrary to the usual patterns of behaviour, like the case of Maximilian Kolbe (1894-1941) who volunteered

<sup>7</sup> Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> See specially *What Computers Still Can't Do. A critique of Artificial Reason* (1992).

<sup>9</sup> See particularly «Minds, Brains, and Programs» (1980).

<sup>10</sup> For instance in «Will Robots Inherit the Earth?» (1994).

<sup>11</sup> See my book *La nueva filosofía de la mente* (1995).

his life in the place of a condemned inmate in Auschwitz, our free volitions mean in general a double contingency, defining their indeterminism or non-necessity<sup>12</sup>.

On the one hand free volitions are non-necessary decisions because I am conscious that I could choose another decision. For example if I choose freely to eat fish I know that I could have chosen to eat meat. On the other hand my free volitions are also non-necessary decisions since I can decide to do something morally speaking good or bad. For instance if I come across a wallet with money and identification papers I am not forced neither to keep it nor to give it back, but I can decide the first action, which is morally bad, or I can decide the second action, which is morally good. Certainly my upbringing and/or my economic needs can condition my decision but not force it if my decision is free. At this point it is important to highlight the distinction between volitions and actions since frequently a certain decision taken freely can not produce the attempted action; for example my free volition of giving somebody a ride into town does not produce the attempted action because my car is broken-down.

In more complete words a volition is free if it is not determined by something or somebody external to the agent, and the agent is conscious that he can decide among several options, and finally he is also conscious that he wants to do his action. We shall consider various cases. If a strong wind makes me push another person this push is not the result of a free volition. If an armed person forces me to give him my wallet this delivery is neither the result of a free volition. If I ask freely for a beer, in order to quench my thirst, I am conscious that I can choose a glass of wine or a glass of water instead, and I am conscious as well that I truly want a beer. Likewise if somebody asks me for help and I can help him, I can choose between helping him, which is morally good, or refusing to help him, which is morally bad.

This double contingency, non-necessity or indeterminism, factual and moral, that is essential to every really free volition shows the possible non-physical (spiritual) nature of free volitions. Certainly our mental processes (sensations, perceptions, concepts, beliefs, emotions, memories, images, inferences or volitions) are closely related with our brains, in the sense that they are processes that emerge from neural processes. In this point I agree with the world-famous neuroscientists Wilder Penfield (1891-1976)<sup>13</sup> and Roger Sperry (1913-1994)<sup>14</sup>, among others, who defend that mental processes are not identical with neural processes, although they are based on neural processes, allowing thus the independence of psychology with respect to neuroscience. But it is my claim that some mental processes (free volitions and other related mental processes I will consider later) are not only emergent from neural processes but also non-physical. This thesis entails two other claims: the openness of the physical world and the existence of a non-physical causation.

The physical world as such is deterministic to the extent that physical events have determinant and definite causes, but what I call «the factual world» (including mental processes, and especially free volitions and other related mental processes) is indeterministic, that is, it embraces psychic events (free decisions) that are, so to speak, «choosing» causes or, having recourse to Latin (*eligere*, to choose; *elegans*, *elegantia*), «elegant» causes. In this way the physical world is open to the psychic world. And with regard to the moral considerations we should recommend *elegance*, that is to say, the ability to choose the superior option. On the other hand if we analyse our experience we notice that we may have the ability to choose or to decide what we want to do without being determined, that

<sup>12</sup> I have defended this point of view in my book *La importancia del conocimiento* (Second ed. 2007).

<sup>13</sup> See his book *The Mystery of the Mind* (1975).

<sup>14</sup> See his article «Mind-Brain Interaction: Mentalism, yes; Dualism, no» (1980).

is, we can be «elegant». But this indeterministic causation is apparently non-physical (spiritual). In a nutshell the argumentation is: if an event is physical, then it is deterministic, but the free volitions are not deterministic, therefore the free volitions are not physical. The neuroscientist Benjamin Libet (1916-2007)<sup>15</sup> thinks that the existence of free will, one genuinely free in the non-determined sense, is at least as good, if not a better, scientific option than is its denial by natural law determinist theory.

Secondly in relation to free volitions we find the mental processes of being conscious. As I have already said, a volition is free if the agent is conscious that he can decide among several options, and he is also conscious that he wants to do his action. However the most important thing, at this field of consciousness, is that in order to have free volitions we need to be conscious of being a self. It is my opinion<sup>16</sup> that we should distinguish four kinds of consciousness: simple awareness, reflective control, subjective consciousness, and self-consciousness. To begin with, in the mental processes of simple awareness the agent is limited to be aware of what is happening to him; for example when I am conscious of seeing a tree. Second, in the mental processes of reflective control the agent analyses his mental processes in order to distinguish its elements and relations; for instance when I supervise my plan for a weekend. Third, in the processes of subjective consciousness the agent takes account of the qualitative or subjective aspects of certain mental processes (sensations and perceptions, but also emotions or volitions). For example, different agents facing the same orange fruit usually see diverse colour shades in the orange. Or different agents knowing the death of a same person usually experience diverse emotions. This kind of consciousness is very popular among neuroscientists and philosophers; it is the problem of *qualia* or the explanation of the diversity of these qualitative and subjective aspects, and some philosophers speak about absent qualia, fading qualia, inverted qualia or dancing qualia, considering this problem (wrongly) «the hard problem of consciousness». In my opinion the fourth kind of consciousness, namely, the processes of self-consciousness, is the consciousness par excellence. In the cases of subjective consciousness the agent experiences subjectively his mental processes, but in the cases of self-consciousness the agent experiences himself as the subject of *all* his mental processes. We have now a complete subjective dimension that refers to the self. In other words it is the consciousness of personal identity, according to which I know that I am the same now, in my youth, in my infancy, and that this sameness will remain in the future.

To have a free volition means to assume as *mine* a decision to act, but to that extent I must be a permanent self and experience myself, that is, I must have mental processes of self-consciousness. While human beings share simple awareness with animals, and to all appearances share reflective control with animals and computers, only human beings have self-consciousness. Our self-consciousness gives women and men a full subjective dimension, referring to the self as something that seems (and we thus experience) to go beyond concrete spaces and times, in such a manner that the self seems to be a non-physical (spiritual) reality. Our personal identity spreads through past, present and future, not being reduced to neural processes, which are developed in a fixed time.

And thirdly in relation to free volitions we find the mental processes of forming a private project of life. Everyone can draw up a personal plan to guide his life, and we can also modify it. For instance I can choose to become physicist, and some time later to become metaphysician. The free choice of this plan of life, that includes a global meaning

<sup>15</sup> *Mind Time* (2004), p. 156.

<sup>16</sup> See my paper «Aproximaciones científicas al problema de la conciencia» (2000).

of my entire life, constitutes an overdetermination for my global agency, that is added to my physical dimension, showing a possible non-physical (spiritual) nature of this free choice. Certainly our genetic program and our environment do condition our agency, but they do not determine our volitions. At this point we should refuse the popular chain of implications defended by the genetic determinism, saying that genes determine brain modules and that these modules determine behaviour; indeed the plasticity of the brain is contrary to a rigid modularity, and the variety of behaviours with respect to the same stimuli is also contrary to the claim that brains determine behaviours. On the other hand it is generally accepted that the influence of the environment is limited by our genome, in such a manner that there is neither an environmental determinism.

Finally in relation to the thought experiment proposed by Ronald Cole-Turner<sup>17</sup> about the creation of a chimp with human neurons, I guess that the creation of a humanzee is science fiction, but anyway I think that the criterion to know whether it is human would be to find out if it has free volitions.

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<sup>17</sup> See COLE-TURNER'S, RONALD, «Humanity in the Laboratory», Gorizia, 2008.