

□ Reading time: 9 min.

With the faculties of the spirit, such as intellect and memory, one remains within the realm of knowing. Now, it is time to delve into the realm of acting. Indeed, “although the tree of prudence has its roots in the intellect, its flowers and fruits are a product of the will.”

The master faculty

According to scholastic anthropology, familiar to the Bishop of Geneva, the main human faculty could be the intellect. This is not the case. As Saint Augustine and some philosophers like Duns Scotus had already done, Saint Francis de Sales assigns the first place to the will.

It is the will, monarch of the soul, “a truly noble will,” that must govern all the “powers” of the soul. Among all the faculties of the human spirit, free will is the only one truly within the power of the human person:

We are not masters of our imagination, as we cannot defend ourselves from an almost infinite number of illusions and imaginings. The same must be said of memory, given that we often wish to remember many things and are unable to do so; or, on the contrary, not to remember many others that we would like to forget. Finally, traverse as much as you like all that is within you, you will find only a small part of which we are masters: it is the will.

The author of *Theotimus* is keen to demonstrate that the will is the true resource of the human person, in that, thanks to it and around it, all the psychic and spiritual elements that make up the human being converge in a harmonious whole.

But how does the will function?

The answer is relatively easy if one refers to the Salesian model of meditation, with its three constituent parts: considerations, affections, and resolutions.

Considerations consist of reflecting and meditating on a good, a truth, a value. Such reflection or meditation normally produces affections, that is, great desires to acquire and possess such good or value, and these affections are capable of “moving the will,” which, once “moved,” produces “resolutions.” While considerations clearly derive from the rational faculties of the spirit (intellect, memory, not forgetting imagination), affections and resolutions are part of what Francis de Sales calls the “heart.”

The **affections** that move the will are twelve, usually going in pairs: love and

hatred, desire and flight, hope and despair, joy and sadness, courage and fear, anger and the feeling of triumph. For Saint Francis de Sales, love always comes first. Love governs the other affections and enters the heart first: "Sadness, fear, hope, hatred, and the other affections of the soul do not enter the heart unless love drags them behind it."

Curiously, the will first of all has a passive dimension, while love is the active power that moves and stirs. The will does not decide unless it is moved by this predominant stimulus: love. And love imposes itself on the will itself. Such is the power of love that, for one who loves, nothing is difficult, "*amanti nihil difficile*"; better still, "for love nothing is impossible."

The fruit of the will are **resolutions**. To will is to choose. As long as one is a child, one is still entirely dependent and incapable of choosing, but growing up, things soon change and choices become necessary. Usually, choices are difficult because they require one to give up one good for another. Most of the time, the heart is divided between the affections of the lower part of the soul and the resolutions of the upper part.

The strength of love

"Love is strong as death," repeats Francis de Sales with the Song of Songs; or rather, "love, stronger than death, softens, tenderises, and melts hearts much faster than all other passions." On closer inspection, the human being only has value because of love, and all human powers and faculties, especially the will, tend towards it. "God wants the human being only for the soul, and the soul only for the will, and the will only for love."

Love uses willpower to govern all faculties and all passions. It will be an "armed love" and such "armed love, reaching zeal, will subdue our passions." This free will "resides in the supreme and most spiritual part of the soul" and "depends on nothing but God and itself; and when all other faculties of the soul are lost and subjected to the enemy, only it remains master of itself so as not to consent in any way."

The choice, however, is not only in the objective to be achieved, but also in the intention that presides over the action. This is an aspect to which Francis de Sales is particularly sensitive, because it touches the quality of acting. Indeed, the pursued end gives meaning to the action. One can decide to perform an act based on many motives. Unlike animals, "man is so master of his human and reasonable actions that he performs them all for an end"; he can even change the natural end of an action, adding a secondary end, "as when, in addition to the intention of helping the poor to whom alms are directed, he adds the intention of obliging the needy to do

the same.”

Among pagans, intentions were rarely disinterested, “they exerted themselves almost only for honour or for some other ephemeral purpose, as Saint Augustine recalls.” Intentions can be polluted “by pride, vanity, temporal interest, or some other bad motive.” There are conversations that are bad for the simple reason that “they are made with bad intention. Sometimes “we pretend to want to be the last and sit at the bottom of the table, but to pass with more honour to the head of the table.”

“Let us therefore purify, *Theotimus*, as much as we can, all our intentions,” asks the author of the *Treatise on the Love of God*. Good intention “animates” the smallest actions and simple daily gestures. Indeed, “we achieve perfection not by doing many things, but by doing them with a pure and perfect intention.” One must not lose heart, because “one can always correct one’s intention, improve it and make it better.”

Resolutions

The will, therefore, must produce “resolutions” or purposes, otherwise, it risks being empty and ineffective. The moment comes when one must no longer “speculate with reasoning,” but “stiffen the will.” “Whether our soul is sad or joyful, submerged in sweetness or bitterness, in peace or troubled, luminous or dark, tempted or tranquil, full of pleasure or disgust, immersed in aridity or tenderness, burned by the sun or refreshed by the dew,” it does not matter; a strong will is not easily diverted from its purposes. “Let us remain firm in our intentions, inflexible in our resolutions,” asks the author of *Philothea*. It is the master faculty on which the value of the person depends. “The whole world is worth less than a soul, and a soul is worth nothing without our good intentions.”

The noun “resolution” indicates a decision that comes at the end of a process, which has involved reasoning with its ability to discern, and the heart, understood in the sense of an affectivity that allows itself to be moved by an attractive good. In the “authentic declaration” that the author of the *Introduction to the Devout Life* invites *Philothea* to pronounce, one reads, “This is my will, my intention, and my decision, inviolable and irrevocable, a will that I confess and confirm without reservations or exceptions.”

A meditation that does not lead to concrete actions would be useless. In the ten meditations proposed as a model in the first part of *Philothea*, we find frequent expressions such as these: “I want,” “I no longer want,” “yes, I will follow the inspirations and advice,” “I will do everything possible,” “I want to do this or that,” “I will make this or that effort,” “I will do this or that thing,” “I choose,” “I want to

take part,” or “I want to take the required care.”

A common confusion is that which identifies will and whim. “This is how libertines act who want no other law than that dictated by their personal will.” A great enemy of the will is routine, passively letting go, custom. The founder of the Visitandines recommended that they be aware of the gestures they made and avoid performing them mechanically:

Let their will conform to the good exterior actions they will perform, both small and large. Let nothing be done out of habit, but by choice and exercise of will; and if sometimes the exterior action anticipates the interior affection, due to habit, let the affection at least follow it closely.

For very understandable reasons, it is advisable to frequently review our resolutions. “This practice will repair your strength weakened by time, warm your heart, revive your good purposes, and make the virtues of your spirit flourish again.”

An admirable educator of the human heart

Saint Francis de Sales has been considered an “admirable educator of the will.” One could also say, an admirable educator of the human heart, if one wishes to highlight the affective dimension characteristic of the Salesian notion of the heart. As has been seen, he neglected no component of the human being: the body with its senses, the soul with its passions, the spirit with its faculties, particularly intellectual ones. But what matters most to him is the human heart, about which he wrote to a correspondent, “It is necessary, therefore, to cultivate this beloved heart with great care and spare nothing that can be useful to its happiness.”

Now, the heart of man is “restless,” according to Saint Augustine’s saying, because it is full of unfulfilled desires. It seems to have neither “rest nor tranquillity.” Francis de Sales then proposes an education of desires as well. Indeed, the main enemy of the will “is the quantity of desires we have for this or that thing. In short, our will is so full of pretensions and projects, that very often it does nothing but waste time considering them one after another or even all together, instead of striving to realise a more useful one.” What attitude is necessary to adopt in the face of the multitude of desires and the dispersion of projects?

If you do not begin to follow some of your desires, they will multiply continuously and crowd your mind so much that you will no longer know how to extricate yourself.

“Our will remains weakened when it loves many things all at once; its desires and wishes are less violent and ardent when it has many.” The solution is obvious: avoid “the rush of desires that hinders the spirit.” It is therefore necessary to regulate desires and let go of useless desires. I fear – writes the Bishop of Geneva to the Baroness de Chantal – “that we amuse ourselves with these desires that are not necessary to us and that we do not leave enough space for our spirit, for the desires that are more useful and indispensable to us.”

The subjects most exposed to being caught by multiple desires are young people. Everything depends on how they intend to manage this resource. “If a young man conceives a strong desire for a certain office before the right time, what good does that desire do him, tell me?” Realism dictates not to amuse oneself with vain, useless, or, worse, harmful desires.

There is, in fact, a kind of “decorum of the will,” just as there is decorum in outward behaviour, explained the founder of the Visitandines regarding “second modesty.” When the spirit allows itself to be taken by immoderate curiosity, the will risks being inflamed by multiple and ineffective desires, as often happens in the spiritual realm.

Motivating the will

Francis de Sales can be considered an educator of the human heart not only because he exalted the strength of the will, but also in the sense that he nourished this faculty by proposing attractive motivations and ideals, capable of setting human freedom in motion. Indeed, to be effective, education must make use of this great resource of the person; one must “move the will,” attracting it to good, truth, and beauty; in short, proposing values and making them desired.

A good pedagogue knows that to lead the pupils towards the proposed objective, be it knowledge or virtue, it is essential to present them with a project that mobilises their energies. Francis de Sales proves to be a master in the art of motivating, as he teaches his “daughter,” Jane de Chantal, one of his favourite maxims, “Everything must be done out of love and nothing by force.”

Whenever Francis de Sales speaks of the human heart, and that is often, the two dimensions, respectively affective and effective, of the will are often intertwined. He wants a gentle and peaceful heart, pure, indifferent, a “heart stripped of affections” incompatible with the vocation, an “upright” heart, “relaxed and without any constraint.” He does not like “tenderness of heart” that reduces itself to self-seeking, and instead requires “firmness of heart” in acting. “To a valiant heart nothing is impossible” – he writes to a lady – to encourage her not to abandon “the course of holy resolutions.” He wants a “virile heart” and at the same time a “docile, malleable, and submissive heart, yielding to everything permitted and

ready to undertake every commitment out of obedience and charity”; a “heart gentle towards one’s neighbour and humble before God,” “nobly proud” and “perennially humble,” “gentle and peaceful.” One of his “beatitudes” reads, “Blessed are the pliable hearts, for they will never break.”

Let us be on guard, because we often resemble the partridge of Paphlagonia which has two hearts. “We have a gentle and courteous heart towards ourselves, and a hard, severe, rigorous heart towards our neighbour.” It is necessary to rectify the heart ceaselessly. “You will be imperfect throughout your life, and there will always be much to correct,” he writes to a person under his direction. It is necessary to “strengthen the heart against temptations.”

When the heart is in turmoil, it is important to help it find peace, because “being troubled and restless in itself, our heart loses the strength necessary to preserve the virtues acquired and, at the same time, the means necessary to resist temptations and the enemy.” A recommendation of vital importance is to “have a continuous and inviolable equality of heart in such a diversity of events.” To maintain balance, “mortify it in its joys; make it rejoice in its mortifications.”

Ultimately, the education of the will aims at full self-mastery, which Francis de Sales expresses through an image, taking the heart in hand, possessing the heart or the soul. “The great joy of man, *Philothea*, is to possess his own soul; and the more perfect patience becomes, the more perfectly we possess our soul.” This does not mean insensitivity, absence of passions or affections, but rather a tension towards self-mastery. It is a path directed towards self-autonomy, guaranteed by the supremacy of the will, free and reasonable.

Conclusion

Undeniably, in Francis de Sales there is an appreciation of affectivity, but also of the will understood in the sense of firmness and constancy in deciding. He said of himself:

In my opinion, there is no soul in the world that prefers more cordially, tenderly and, in good faith, more lovingly than I; indeed, it pleased God to give me a heart like this.

He even goes so far as to say, “I am the most affectionate man in the world,” but immediately adds, “I love independent, vigorous souls who are not effeminate,” knowing full well that exaggerated “tenderness” “clouds the heart, troubles it, and distracts it.” Without ever renouncing affective love, Francis de Sales advocates for effective love, based on the “resolutions” of the effective will.