The Concept of Freedom: Effects of Ockham's Revolution

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Abstract: In his famous book Sources of Christian Ethics, fr. Servais Theodore Pinckaers OP described the process of transformation that our understanding of the ethically right and wrong has undergone for the last two thousand years. Much of his attention the scientist gave to the problem of human freedom, on the decision of which largely depend the moral principles of a society. In particular, he clarified and analyzed the transition from the concept of freedom advocated by Thomas Aquinas to the William Ockham's concept of freedom. In this article, I will not only present this transformation, but also point out those of its consequences in European thinking, which we still observe in our societies.

Keywords: freedom, virtue, indifference, autonomy.

1. Freedom in the understanding of Thomas Aquinas

The problem of free will became one of the important topics in medieval Christian philosophy, primarily due to the comprehension of the interaction between the absolute will of God and the moral choice of man. In this article, I will mainly refer to the solution proposed by Thomas Aquinas, but before him about freedom not only Augustine Aurelius wrote, but also such apologists as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, such Church Fathers as Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa. In turn, medieval solution, early as well as high, is based on the ancient philosophy, for example, Aristotle and the Stoics, and, of course, on Holy Scripture.

Freedom, according to Aquinas, is an ability proceeding from the intellect and the will ("liberum arbitrium *dicitur esse facultas voluntatis et rationis*¹, which, in turn, are the inclinations to truth and good. The first dimension of free choice (the order of entity and specification) depends on the intellect: on the object of knowledge, as well as on the analysis of alternatives. Initially, the direction of judgment is determined by some intuitive comprehension, the ability to choose between good and evil in favor of the first (principle: bonum est faciendum, malum est vitandum), namely by synderesis. The second dimension of free choice comes from the subject (the choice between action and inaction). Judgments of the intellect, practical judgments, give to the choice a conscious motivation, however this choice is actualized by will, by effort of the person who strives for the good by means of the action, and thus it becomes free. It is worth noting that the original movement of the will, according to Thomas, like the intuitive knowledge of the first principles, is a spontaneous volition of such goals as good and happiness. The difficult task of freedom consists in choosing the means to achieve these goals, i.e. it is represented as a function of the will.²

As we see, according to Aquinas, will and intellect follow natural inclinations to good, truth, happiness, that's why he considers these inclinations as sources of freedom, and not as restrictions for its manifestation. Spontaneity, from which the freedom proceeds, is inherent in all people by nature; it ensures the achievement of happiness as a natural goal. In the realm of morality, this spontaneity is manifested in the sense of truth, good, right and love; i.e. they also do not limit, but reveal the freedom: "We are free, not in spite of them, but because of them. The more we develop them, the more we grow in freedom".3

Therefore, it is possible to evaluate the so-understood freedom only on the basis of the attractiveness of the object: it spontaneously manifests itself with respect to the things marked by good or truth. The subject can be mistaken and even deliberately strive for a false good - this is the weakness of freedom or rather of the being endowed with freedom. That's why a person should cleans his or her inclinations of external layers. The naturalness of striving for happiness means that counteraction to this desire cannot be called free.

On the other hand, the fact that we cannot choose the ultimate goal, but only the means to achieve it, also does not mean a limitation of freedom. According to the logic of Thomas Aquinas, the very our ability to unlimited truth and good is unlimited. Looking forward them (or loving God), we do not experience pressure, because this gravity, and consequently, the will motivated by it is natural for us. Thanks to our spiritual abilities, our unlimited freedom, our will becomes free also in relation to all final and individual goods, means on the way to the goal.

The virtues help us to advance in the way to the final goal, to adapt to the true good by developing of our perfect natural abilities. Virtues, according to Aquinas, are the perfections of strength, of dynamics in a person ("virtus, ex ipsa ratione nominis, importat perfectionem poten*tiae*"⁴). We can say that virtue is a property of character, or a permanent predisposition to actions that are agreed with the good. Virtue is directly connected with the act of making a decision, with a choice: we manifest virtues when perpetrate acts of will, but also our acts of will, our choices are conditioned by character traits. This is the case with all habitus - predispositions that govern desires and behavior in general (virtues are the most perfect of them), abilities to act and develop his- or herself (with regard to Tomas, habitus should not be confused with habits as psychological mechanisms). At first glance, such

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a system of habitus and virtues should limit freedom, prompting certain decisions to be made. However, in the views of Aquinas, habitus and, especially, virtues, in the case of their development, on the contrary, allow freedom to unfold, as they promote progress towards the ultimate goal, i.e. toward happiness.

As I have already noted, virtues can be and must be developed, and the path of such improvement coincides with the way of strengthening the will, the intellect and, as a result, the educating of freedom. Surprisingly, this education begins from discipline – not as a violent direction of the will, but as an appeal to natural inclinations, spontaneous sense of the good, to a conscience. The task is not to inculcate behavioral habits that restrict freedom, but, on the contrary, to discover the opportunity that it has: the desire of unlimited truth and unlimited good.

At the second stage of that formation, a disciplined person takes his or her life – first of all, moral one – in own hands and, so to say, develops the taste for values. Instead of the limitations that characterize discipline, the person is motivated by the desire for progress of his or her own virtue for its own sake.

At the third stage of the freedom's formation Thomas sees not only moral maturity, but also fruitfulness, as well as the responsibility of a person:

Due to the gradual development of his faculties, the human person is now capable of viewing his life in its entirety. He performs his actions personally according to a plan, a higher goal which will profit himself and others. This leads him, through patient acceptance of all trials and obstacles, to the fulfillment of a lift project which gives meaning, value and fruitfulness to existence.⁵

As we will see later, in this definition of Pinckaers there is something from Sartre's attitude, however, he expresses the thought of Thomas Aquinas. The similarity is natural, since it is a question of one subject – freedom. On the other hand, the point of view of Aquinas cannot be estimated worthily without specifying that the formation of freedom should include not only development and harmonization of one's personality, but also an openness to another person. Agape love is the perfection of such an openness.

Thus, from the point of view of Thomas Aquinas, freedom is a possibility of development coordinated with human rationality. However, the medieval theologian does not exclude the ability to resist the prompts of intellect, also calling it freedom. Contrary to teleology, there is also the possibility not to strive for happiness. So, Aquinas overcomes the threat of determinism on the part of rationality; however, he believes such a decision is not the maximum manifestation of the freedom, but, on the contrary, a sign of its weakness (something like childish whim).⁶

In conclusion, I should note that, Aquinas adopts the Aristotelian definition, according to which a man is free, because he is the goal for himself, and does not exist for something else. However, unlike Aristotle, who considered some people to be slaves by nature, Thomas Aquinas asserted the radical and universal equality of all people. This remark allows us to assert that "freedom by nature" is considered by Thomas as "one of the refinements of existence in a particularly excellent way: existence not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself⁷⁷, which inherent in a person.

2. William Ockham's revolution

British Franciscan William Ockham was almost a contemporary of Thomas Aquinas. However, his attitude to freedom and morality in whole is fundamentally different. He asserts that freedom is a power to cause, indifferently and accidently, different effects, in such a way that a person can bring about an effect or don't do it. Freedom is postulated by Ockham as the ability to choose between opposites; he reduces it to indifference in relation to those values that could determine this choice. The indifference to the objects of choice allows the will to proceed when it makes a decision solely from itself.

Such conclusions Ockham reached analyzing the nature of God. For Ockham, the will of God is so free that it opposes determination even by His goodness. Good, according to Occam, is what God desires, but not contrary. The same can be said about the moral order in the created world: he divine will at any time can change its own precepts, even the first commandment. Thus, the original freedom inherent in God is indifferent to the objects of choice. Freedom becomes the main property of God; He becomes the freedom himself.

Since there cannot be two definitions of freedom in one system, Ockham gives a person the same independence from his own nature as God. However, God also is omnipotent, He can impose His will on man: this is the only difference between divine and human freedom. Accordingly, the relationship between God and man can rest only on the "right of the strong" (first of all, of God); the strong enforces the low, and the weak has the obligation to fulfill it. Taking into account the fact that, according to Ockham, God is free to change any of His precepts, we see here the way to moral relativism: morality rests on obligation versus law regardless of its content.

Freedom as the "right of the strong" to impose his law on the basis of non-determinism by external objects and internal characteristics also means that it turns out to be the primary force in relation to reason and will. It is a matter of free choice – to learn or not to learn, to desire or not to desire. In relation to the reason, this means that the will can resist to its decisions. Thus, in spite of the fact that freedom is declared to be the primary fact of experience, practically it is identified with the will, it becomes the source and conductor of human actions. The will receives a new interpretation.

It was no longer defined as an attraction toward the good, exercised in love and desire, as in St. Thomas and the Fathers. It became a radical indifference, whence proceeded a pure will, actually ab imposition of will on itself or others, 'a conscious pressure of self upon self', to use E. Mounier's definition. This was to become the modern understanding of will.⁸

But most acutely Ockham opposed freedom to the natural inclinations of human – to good, truth and happiness. Similarly, sensuality and, in particular, passions become

threats, obstacles to freedom, not only: the will strengthens itself in opposing them (the rigorism in morality). As a motivation, alien to the will, Ockham considers also a virtue.

Since the inclinations are in subjection to freedom, the desire for happiness ceases to be the determining factor for the human. A person is free to choose happiness, unhappiness as well as his or her nonexistence. Hence the negation of the finality, i.e. the existence of the ultimate goal, which is happiness.⁹

The negation of the finality is directly related to Ockham's nominalism. If, according to Thomas Aquinas, ultimate goal is a principle of the unity of all particular person's actions, then Ockham's absolute indeterminacy of the individual actions breaks the foundation of such unity. An independent action takes place after an instant unrelated decision. Therefore, Ockham considers the goal only as a single, isolated one of a concrete action.

A person whose dignity is the ability to do at any moment what he or she wants becomes elusive - result of collecting a "puzzle" from various, inconsistent acts.¹⁰ This disappearance of the person behind a variety of actions did not signify, however, its destruction, but the concentration on him- or herself in the name of the most important willing - the assertion of the freedom. Indifference of the will in relation to inclinations and prompts of reason does not mean apathy, but, on the contrary, implies a kind of passion: "the human will to self-affirmation, to the assertion of a radical difference between itself and all also that existed"¹¹. This requirement to provide a person, rests solely on his or her selfness, the ability to choose between opposites, we now, after Kant, call autonomy. We understand it as independence from the law, norms and everything that does not come from the self, as an opportunity to refuse, to contradict, to accuse and generally to be against something, and also to enjoy the pleasure in arbitrariness of our actions.

3. Development of the concepts of freedom and autonomy after Ockham's "revolution"

At the time when the philosophy of the Middle Ages was transformed into a Modern one, Ockham's understanding of freedom was firmly entrenched in European thinking. Descartes, for instance, argues that the will by nature is so free that it can never be constrained, limited. Contemporary of Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, being a materialist and emphasizing the egoistic character of human nature, pays much attention to the motives of person's activity. He already doesn't understand why Thomas Aquinas has placed inclinations and reason in the foundation of freedom. Therefore, although natural law, according to Hobbes, is a freedom (liberty) to do anything against anyone, referring to own interest (to own goal), this freedom is limited by the natural law in the form of reason's direction. At the same time, the inborn desire, the will to claim the benefit for oneself, is in such a disunity with this natural law that the latter can only be guaranteed by the dictates of the state. It is the basing of freedom as an unlimited choice between alternatives that prevents Hobbes from asserting the existence of real freedom - permissiveness – in civil society: according to its nature, such a society deprives the individual to carry freely certain actions in favor of preserving the harmony of interests.¹²

Jean-Jacques Rousseau also thinks in the same way: man is born free, i.e. unlimited in his choice of actions. Naturally, liberty is "bounded only by the strength of the individual"¹³. Liberation, therefore, consists in overcoming the restrictions (imposed by other people) and gaining the benefit of one's own strength without meeting resistance. However, this freedom from limitations is combined in Rousseau's theory with positive freedom: it is into it that the social contract transforms the permissiveness. When concluding the contract, people put all their strength under control of the common will; now they make decisions not individually, but together. Such civil liberty implies the right to preserve property and enjoy the rights of a citizen (first of all, the right to take part in collective decision-making), as well as moral freedom.

Pointing to this transformation of the liberty, Rousseau, however, realizes that in fact it is its limitation and even destruction. A natural human being who cares only about natural liberty does not have a sufficient basis to be tempted by the delights of civil liberty and moral freedom. The social contract, thus, annuls freedom, but only because Rousseau thinks of it in the terms of Ockham, as an unconditional arbitrariness.

In the current discussion, we cannot ignore David Hume's attitude. Only Ockham's conception makes him regard freedom of will as a fiction. According to the British empiricist, human actions are led by passions by analogy with the attraction and repulsion forces in the theory of Newton. According to Hume, a passion is "a violent and sensible emotion of mind, when any good or evil is presented, or any object, which, by the original formation of our faculties, is fitted to excite an appetite"¹⁴. In other words, the motive power of each action is desire; i.e. every action always has its a reason (on the principle of association in our minds). If person's actions have a rigid connection with motives or personal characteristics, then they are so caused as the movements of material objects. Identifying freedom with chance, Hume does not find it in human consciousness, that's why he declares it to be the same fiction as the independent existence of self.

Immanuel Kant also shares this point of view, but only when writes about the world of phenomena. This world, which includes, among other things, the actions and mental states of a person (e.g., empirical character), everything that constitutes experience, that is organized by the forms of space and time and by the categories. We can find a reason to every action of a person, it can be deduced from the phenomena of a natural order. Kant clearly states that there is no freedom with respect to this empirical character. However, it is in the world of noumena, lying beyond the forms of time and space and the category of causality. The best proof of this is the existence of morality which is impossible without freedom.

Such, noumenal, freedom is thought by Kant, first of all, as an independence from the laws of nature, but, in turn, as an obedience to those laws that a man "makes himself and in virtue of which his maxims can have their part in the making of universal law (to which he at the same time subjects himself)"¹⁵. Such freedom cannot be

either learned or understood from any experience, it holds only as "a necessary presupposition of reason in a being who believes himself to be conscious of a will – that is, of a power distinct from mere appetition"¹⁶. The will is aware of its ability to initiate a chain of causes by the power of reason, i.e. freely; and therefore it is a creator of those laws to which it obeys.

According to Kant, will is a kind of causality of intelligent beings, and freedom is its property, which allows to action independently of extraneous reasons. Freedom, then, turns out to be independence, first of all, from external world which affects the will, that is from sensual inclinations, pleasure, pain and the pursuit of happiness, of any empirical interest, as well as from all other inclinations that do not proceed from the will. Kant, of course, does not forbid a person to wish happiness, as well as take care of his or her health. However, it is not these aspirations, but obligation, that must be taken into account when someone choose an action. We see here that Kant accepts the nominalistic concept of free will.

According to Kant, freedom should be postulated, first of all, because otherwise it is impossible to imagine the action of practical reason, which establishes norms and rules of human behavior. Only being independent of any external factor in relation to it, the reason "exercises causality in regard to its objects"¹⁷. Otherwise the subject would attribute the determination of his power of judgement to an external to his will impulsion. This is unacceptable, since only one impulsion attaches moral value to an action, namely, respect for the law which the will itself lays down.

Thus, Kant postulates autonomy as a property of will, through which it is a law to itself, independently of the objects for which it wishes, i.e. self-sufficiency of the will. If the will seeks the law that is to determine it in the characters of objects, it is heteronomy. In that case the object gives the low to the will, and it acts according to the laws of nature.¹⁸

I should note, however, that autonomy, in the form in which Kant postulates it, does not mean the justification for any human actions. It is the first imperative that limits it: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"¹⁹. Autonomy is predetermined by the universal nature of the reason, not by certain needs that are the consequences of freely chosen actions. Any action that does not proceed from my reason cannot be truly mine, it is heteronomous. In turn, any action that proceeds from my reason must meet its requirements: I must act only according to the principle that I would like to see as the basis for such actions of all people. This demand of reason, expressed as a categorical imperative, is a formal law (it cannot be formulated in terms of consequences, and it recognizes only one motive - action according to it). Freedom can be postulated only in relation to this demand:

This amounts to freedom, because acting morally is acting according to what we truly are, moral/rational agents. The law of morality, in other words, is not imposed from outside. It is dictated by the very nature of reason itself. To be a rational agent is to act for reasons. By their very nature, reasons are of general application. [...] So if the decision to act morally is the decision to act with the ultimate purpose of conforming my action to universal law, then this amounts to the determination to act according to my true nature as a rational being. And acting according to the demands of what I truly am, of my reason, is freedom.²⁰

Morality, therefore, is identified by Kant with the universal demand of reason, to listen to which we are constrained by obligation. The latter is the need for an action dictated by respect for this demand as a law. It is obligation that frees a person from subordinating empirical necessity. Fulfilling the obligation, a person becomes both moral and free at the same time.

It is worth mentioning that Kant's ideas, like also Locke's, formed the basis of the phenomenon that we call Western liberalism. In terms of politics liberalism is the doctrine according to which the right and freedom of the individual have a priority in relation to the intervention of the state in the life of citizens. The main reason for this attitude of the state is the idea of a person as a rational being, capable to learn the truths on one's own, to identify one's will in accordance with that truths, and therefore to direct it to creation and not to destruction, as well as to respect the similar actions of another person. Such a person knows what his or her interest is, and intelligently realizes it in a healthy competition with others, finding a compromise that does not disparage the dignity of any of the parties. Finally, the whole society embodied in the state cannot consider the person as a means for even the highest goals, and therefore violate his or her rights, treat the person as heteronomous in relation to that society.

However, at the origins of liberalism one more ethical direction, the opposite of Kant's deontology, lies, namely, utilitarianism. Proceeding from the understanding of the good as an individual's benefit, and the common good as a collection of interests of members of society, Jeremy Bentham protects the ideas of liberalism in his own way. The state's non-interference in private life, especially the economic one, is necessary, in his opinion, in order that nothing prevents the individual from maximizing pleasure and minimizing suffering.

John Stuart Mill writes about freedom in his work *On Liberty*.²¹ He argues there that self-determination and the possibility of choice are the components of the concept of happiness. Any restrictions imposed by the state, in this case, should be justified only by mitigating harm to other members of society. Restrictions of freedom, therefore, are permissible only to ensure safety of its manifestations.

Speaking about freedom, about its modern understanding, we cannot help mentioning the influential concept of Jean-Paul Sartre. Without going into the details of his paradoxical definition of freedom as such that has no essence, I will only reveal those moments that show us that Sartre's understanding inherits the tradition that Ockham laid. Thus I will consider the freedom with respect to the motives and end of the action or choice.

It is important to note that the topic of freedom in *Be*ing and Nothingness Sartre especially examines in connection with the study of human actions in the world or the realizing of personal project. Such an action always proceeds from a desire as recognizing a certain lack in oneself, and therefore it is intentional, i.e. it has an end. In turn, the end refers to a cause or a motive. Thus, determinism seems to be justified, however, Sartre dodges from it, arguing that it is action that makes a decision about causes and ends, and action is an expression of freedom. After all, to be free means to determine oneself independently to wanting or choosing: to choosing ends and acting for their achievement.

First of all, Sartre points to the stupidity of disputes between determinists and proponents of freedom as indifferent, unmotivated choice. That proponents, being the followers of Ockham, "are concerned to find cases of decision for which there exists no prior cause, or deliberations concerning two opposed actions which are equally possible and possess causes (and motives) of exactly the same weight"²². At first glance, the determinists seem to be more sensible, because the action, in order to be a human one, and not a physical event, must have motivation and end. However, here Sartre puts the question of the very end and the very cause.

Sartre's analysis shows that the end is something nonexistent. A human actions to fill a certain lack, emptiness, in him- or herself. Similarly, the matter is with the cause. It appears only then when a person, being-for-itself, attaches to it the significance of the motive, and it happens not because of referring to some previous being, but because of intentional involvement in nothingness. Thus, not the independent from the being-for-itself cause creates the motive for the action, but the totality of his or her projects (e.g., not suffering, but a decision to change the situation in which a person suffers). Such a motive is an integral part of an action that turns out to be free. The action itself makes a decision about the ends and causes. Only through actions can we get an answer to the question: what we are; and even the feelings we are refer to justify the choice, in fact, are the product of an action. When we evaluate our behavior, only its consequences are important, because per se there are no causes. But there are not the ends also, because the action proceeds from nothingness. Thus, a person is free even when faces with obstacles in the pursuit of aspirations, for the main thing in freedom is not achievements, but the desire itself, proceeding from negativity.

Speaking of the cause, Sartre agrees that it becomes the basis for the action only as a totality of rational considerations that justify it, or as an objective evaluation of the situation. In other words, freedom requires reflection. Through reflection, a person discovers that he or she is a nothingness for him- or herself, and affirms the freedom from everything external, including the cause. Sartre writes: "To adopt Husserl's famous expression, simple voluntary reflection by its structure as reflectivity practices the $\epsilon \pi o \chi \eta$ with regard to the cause; it holds the cause in suspense, puts it within parentheses"23. Thus rationality, in spite of the fact that it is necessary for freedom, is nevertheless secondary to it, because proceeds from it as a negation of the reality which exists outside the person (freedom from), in contrast to which the person becomes a being-for-itself.

The same can be said about the will, which is a *négatité* and a force of nihilation. It does not create the end that freedom seeks, but is an instrument for achieving it: "Freedom is nothing but the existence of our will or of

our passions in so far as this existence is the nihilation of facticity; that is, the existence of a being which is its being in the mode of having to be it"²⁴.

The fact that freedom precedes both will and consciousness does not, however, means the chronological precedence. Freedom exists in the very action, in the very choice. Hence it follows that the choice cannot be nonfree, i.e. it has not conditions, and the motive of the action is in the action itself. Like Ockham, Sartre comes to the absolutism of freedom. In other words,

by the sole fact that I am conscious of the causes which inspire my action, these causes are already transcendent objects for my consciousness; they are outside. In vain shall I seek to catch hold of them; I escape them by my very existence. I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free.²⁵

4. Conclusions

Traditional concept of freedom followed mainly Aristotle. It was developed by Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages, first of all, in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. He didn't consider the teleology of person's action and the conscious motivation for it as barriers for personal freedom.

Ockham defined freedom as the ability to choose indifferently between opposites. Thus he began the tradition not to call free such actions that proceed from the pursuit of happiness, from natural inclinations, personal convictions. In other words, freedom, in his opinion, precedes the self and determines this self. Freedom becomes the defining property of a person.

The influence of Ockham's conception can be seen in such different thinkers as Descartes, Hobbes and Rousseau. The latter argues that freedom as arbitrariness of will is a natural state of human being. Even civil liberty and moral freedom, according to Rousseau, are limitations.

Following Ockham's definition, Hume declares freedom to be a fiction, and Kant agrees with him when it comes to the world of phenomena and the empirical character. Kant postulates the existence of the freedom in the world of noumena. Nevertheless, he still proclaims it incompatible not only with feelings, but also with any inclinations and aspirations that do not arise from the pure will.

On the basis of Kant's concept of autonomy and utilitarian views, so-called Western liberalism was developed. But especially clear the absolutization of freedom appears in the philosophy of the XX-th century, primarily, in existentialism. According to Sartre, not motives and ends determine the actions of the individual, but vice versa. He claims freedom to be the ability to choose these ends. A person assigns both the end and the motive to be what they are.

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Notes

¹ Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, I-II, 83, 2.

- ² Cf. Pinckaers, 379-385.
- ³ Pinckaers, 358
- ⁴ Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, I-II, 55, 2 co.
- ⁵ Pinckaers, 366.
- ⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo*, qu. 6 co; ad 7.
- ⁷ Piechowiak, 46.
- ⁸ Pinckaers, 332.
- 9 Cf. Pinckaers, 259-260.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Pinckaers, 338.
- ¹¹ Pinckaers, 338.
- ¹² See more: Hobbes, 75-82.
- ¹³ Rousseau.
- ¹⁴ Hume.
- ¹⁵ Kant, 103.
- ¹⁶ Kant, 127.
- ¹⁷ Kant, 116.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Kant, 108.
- ¹⁹ Kant, 88.
- ²⁰ Taylor, 363.
- ²¹ The 4th edition of the work which is available online: Mill, John
- Stuart. On Liberty. London: Longman, Roberts & Green, 1869.
- ²² Sartre, 436.
- ²³ Sartre, 451.
- ²⁴ Sartre, 444.
- ²⁵ Sartre, 439.