

THE MYSTERY OF DEATH: A RECENT CONTRIBUTION

The idea of the "final option" is not new; it has been made familiar by such writers as Mersch, Troisfontaines, and Gleason, to speak only of some of its foremost proponents who have written in, or been translated into, English. It will not be unfair to these writers, however, to suggest that the two most important moments in the development and presentation of the final-option idea have been the writings of P. Glorieux and now of L. Boros.¹ The connection of the two names is important. While the preoccupations of the two men differ, Glorieux's interpretation of St. Thomas is for Boros a datum in the light of which he extrapolates the thought of several modern philosophers and finds among them a convergence which puts a new seal, as it were, on the final-option theory.

In a series of articles in the thirties and forties, Glorieux sought footing and respectability for the final-option theory by an analysis of the Thomistic parallel between the fixation in evil of the fallen angel and the fixation in evil of the damned human being, a parallel summed up in St. John Damascene's dictum, frequently quoted by St. Thomas: "Hoc enim est hominibus mors quod est angelis casus."² Glorieux's purpose was to justify the ways of God to men, that is, to try to show that God does not arbitrarily inflict an eternal punishment on angel or man, but that angel and man are responsible for the eternity of their own damnation. His analysis of St. Thomas seemed to show him that, for Thomas, angel and man alike are fixed in adherence to sin by an exhaustive act of freedom: the angelic choice is a single act; man (if an adult) has made a series of imperfect choices over the course of a lifetime, but these are in any event capped and climaxed by a definitive, because total and exhaustive, choice made at the moment of death. Thus, not God but man is the cause of hell's being eternal (admittedly, *de potentia absoluta*, God could offer graces after the angel's fall or man's death which would overcome the fixation in evil, but such divine action would not accord with the nature of the beings He had created). Glorieux found, as an extra dividend, so to speak, that this supposed view of St. Thomas resolved several other problems: that of the forgiveness of venial sins with which a man might, in everyday phraseology, "die unrepentant" (the choice in the moment of death, being radical and total, leaves no room for an only partial adhesion to either good or evil); the problem of the "faith of the damned"

¹ Ladislaus Boros, S.J., *The Mystery of Death*. Translated by Gregory Bainbridge, O.S.B. New York: Herder and Herder, 1965. Pp. x + 201. \$4.50.

² Cf. P. Glorieux, "Endurcissement final et grâces dernières," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 59 (1932) 865-92; "Fieri est factum esse," *Divus Thomas* (Piacenza) 41 (1938) 254-78; "In hora mortis," *Mélanges de science religieuse* 6 (1949) 185-216.

(same resolution: total acceptance or total rejection of the supernatural); the problem of infants dying unbaptized. He noted, more or less in passing, that the dignity of man is better upheld in this theory of final option.³

Boros' preoccupation is to maintain the dignity of man as a person rather than to justify God: he argues that if man is to decide his destiny in a fully personal way, it can only be in the moment of death (as interpreted by Glorieux), for only then is he able, for the first time, to actuate his full capacity as a person for free choice. The significance of Boros' book in the context of contemporary philosophical concern with death and the person has been marked by reviewers, notably by James Collins.⁴ Since the book has already been widely reviewed and the many fine things it contains have been brought to prospective readers' attention, I shall limit myself (1) to what I regard as the decisive point upon which the thesis of the book stands or falls, the point, already mentioned, on which Boros is explicitly heir to Glorieux's thought: the determination of the "moment of death"; and (2) to the implications, for the human person, of the final-option theory.

The central problem faced by both authors is twofold: (1) How are we to define the "moment of death"? (2) Within the context given by the answer to that first question, how are we to conceive of "dying" as a personal act and not a purely passive happening, such as the usual definition of death as "separation of soul from body" might suggest that it is?

Many who refer to "final option" at the "moment of death" seem to mean by this latter phrase, if we are to judge from the way they write, a sort of gradual slipping of soul from body, a gradual clarification to man, as intellectual and volitional being, of his situation before God and eternity, and a gathering up of his energies into one great act of acceptance or rejection. It may well be that God gives many men, perhaps all men, special graces in these final moments. But, as Glorieux and Boros point out, this idea of the "moment of death" is really not concerned at all with the actual moment of death but with the process leading up to death; and during this time when the body is "loosing its hold" upon the soul, man's action remains always the action of a composite being, of a spirit engaged in matter. There is nothing in the nature of man's action during this period which fixes him in unalterable adhesion either to good or to evil, nothing that satisfies Glorieux's and Boros' demand for a total, exhaustive act of free choice.

Boros approaches his description of the moment of death, i.e., the moment of strict "dying," of separating of body from soul (as opposed to all that precedes death and of which we are usually thinking when we speak of "dy-

³ Cf. *Nouvelle revue théologique* 59 (1932) 887.

⁴ Cf. *Critic*, April-May, 1966, pp. 58-61.

ing”), by answering an objection (actually two objections, but the central point in each is the same): Between “before death” and “after death” there is no interval of time in which a decision (much less the complex of spiritual actions that go into the making of a decision) can take place. His answer (p. 5) I find obscure because he accepts the temporal terms set by the objector, and says that since “death” is not a moment in a temporal succession but “as it were, a line of demarcation between two moments without any temporal extension of its own,” therefore “this only means that the last moment before the break and the first after it merge into one another. . . . Therefore, the moment of death, the transition itself, is—when looked at from the subsequent condition—the last moment of the preceding condition, and—when viewed from the preceding condition—the first moment of the succeeding condition.” This answer in terms of time is confusing and also perhaps misleading as to Boros’ real meaning. What is ultimately at issue are two things, not three: the state of union of soul with mortal body, such that man’s personal activity is always that of an embodied spirit; and the state of separation of soul from mortal body (whatever may be said of an immediate passage of the soul to union with a new body, whose character is determined by the choice made by man “in dying”). There is no third thing, that is, a transition as something in-between. Boros’ meaning, therefore, comes out more clearly in a sentence I omitted from his answer as quoted above: “The moments of the soul’s ‘separating’ and ‘being separated’ thus coincide.” There is thus really no sense in which “the last moment before the break and the first after it merge into one another,” no sense in which the “moment” of “separating” can be viewed as “the last moment of the preceding condition” (that is, of union of soul with mortal body). The moment of separating is identifiable only as the first moment of the succeeding condition.

The identification of “separating” (which is also a “becoming separated,” *separari* as well as *se separare*, since there is a passive element in our “dying”) and of the state of “being separated” was a cardinal point in Glorieux’s thesis, and to it he devoted a whole article.⁵ To this principle as elaborated by Glorieux appeal is made by Boros. Furthermore, all his descriptions of fully personal being and activity, such as a definitive and unalterable choice requires, are in terms of such an understanding of the “moment of death”; cf., e.g., “. . . the third stage [in the movement of being], to which the soul

⁵ See the *Divus Thomas* article (supra n. 2), esp. pp. 273–74; argument resumed in the *Mélanges* article, pp. 192–95, and summarized as “la mort est la séparation de l’âme d’avec le corps; la séparation est quelque chose d’instantané; se séparer et être séparé ne font qu’un.”

belongs as it parts from the body and becomes fully awake to its own spirituality. In death the spiritual movement of being is liberated from the alien element of non-personal temporality. The spirit's succession now becomes entirely interior, that is, determined solely by the succession inherent in its exercise of its own being. This occurs in a total awareness and presence of being, and not in mere flashes that reach us only fragmentarily. Thus the spirit is no longer swept along by an alien succession. It is able to realize fully the whole continuity of its being, all at once, in one and the same act" (p. 7). It is in such conditions, which mark the very moment of "dying" itself, that man's final and definitive choice is made.

This determination of the "moment of death" is, obviously, the critical point. Glorieux argued that the Church in its traditional preaching of "death as the end of man's pilgrimage [*status viae*]" had never determined that "death (= dying)" is the end in the sense of being a terminus outside the *status viae*, and that consequently "dying," in Glorieux's sense, as the first moment of the soul's existence in separation from the mortal body, can legitimately be said to be part of the *status viae* and, as such, must be a moment in which a destiny-determining choice can be and is made. But in this matter do we really have simply an "absence de documents officiels de l'Eglise en effet, et d'indications révélées"?⁶ Is it not part of the scriptural kerygma, carried on in the Church's preaching (and in St. Thomas' theology, to which Glorieux is appealing), that we are judged by what we do in the body, that is, *as men*, whereas for Glorieux the decisive act of a man is one done in angel-like conditions of existence and action, when he is no longer a man at all? In other words, is it not implicit in this preaching that *status viae* coincides with the state of union of soul with mortal body, and that if "dying" is understood as the first moment of separation of soul from body, it does fall outside the *status viae*?

Glorieux, who always insisted that he was simply proposing a theological hypothesis which seemed to him implicit in certain Thomistic principles, found his chief argument, as I have already mentioned, in the parallel drawn by St. Thomas between fallen angel and damned human being when he deals with the question of their abiding "obstinacy in evil." The parallel states that as the angelic choice, made as it was without any influence of error or passion, was total and irreversible, so man, when he passes into the conditions of knowledge and volition proper to a separated spirit, adheres immovably to the choice he has made. From the parallel Glorieux concluded that Thomas must implicitly be envisaging an act of choice made by man under the conditions proper to the separated soul. But such a conclusion is

⁶ *Mélanges*, p. 202.

incompatible with Thomas' explicit statements on several points: (1) that there can be men who die in original sin without ever having made a free personal decision for or against adhesion to God and who therefore have neither the vision of God nor the penalties proper to hell;⁷ (2) that man receives a longer probation period than an angel, because his knowledge and consequently his choice is less perfect;⁸ (3) that the soul adheres immovably to the end chosen in this life, that is, while in the body.⁹

It seems clear that in discussing the obstinacy of the man who is damned, St. Thomas is dealing with what might be called a "mechanism" for explaining why the obstinacy is antecedent to and not consequent upon God's denial of grace, and not directly with the conditions in which man's choice, fixed by separation of soul from body, is made in this life. The question may, of course, remain open whether Thomas' explanation does in fact show that the obstinacy of the damned, in their refusal of God, is truly antecedent to and thus independent of a possible offer of grace after death. I am interested here only in whether or not Glorieux's conclusion is really implicit in what Thomas says. Thomas gives no indication that it is, and every indication that it is not. I think that Glorieux has, in fact, smuggled into his reading of Thomas an idea of the freedom needed by man if he is justly to be damned, and that this idea is not shared by Thomas.

It is such an ideal of personal freedom which is to the fore in Boros' book. He accepts Glorieux's analysis of St. Thomas: "He [G.] notes that in important passages St. Thomas quotes a phrase of St. John Damascene's: 'Hoc enim est hominibus mors quod est angelis casus,' establishing a parallel *between death and the situation of the angels in their moment of decision*. . . . This parallelism can reside only in the fact that in death man has to make an 'angelic' decision. With the help of this knowledge Aquinas' scattered statements on death can be seen in a new perspective. The Angelic Doctor had already formed the concept of the hypothesis of a final decision. Therefore,

⁷ Cf. *In 2 Sent.*, d. 33, q. 2, a. 2. The article concerns unbaptized infants, but these must in the logic of Glorieux's theory come under its provisions.

⁸ *In 2 Sent.*, d. 7, q. 1, a. 2, *solutio*, par. 7: "Finis . . . viae hominis est mors sua; finis autem angeli est terminus electionis suae, qua bono adhaesit vel malo. Unde sicut homines post mortem in bono confirmantur vel in malo, ita et angeli post conversionem vel aversionem. Datur autem homini longior via quam angelo, quia erat magis a Deo distans, et oportebat quod in ejus [Dei] cognitionem inquirendo perveniret; angelus autem statim deiformi intellectu sine inquisitione in divina pervenire potuit."

⁹ Cf. *Contra gent.* 3, 144; 4, 93: "Sicut boni in carne viventes omnium suorum operum et desideriorum finem constituunt in Deo, ita mali in aliquo indebito fine avertente eos a Deo. Sed animae separatae bonorum immobiliter inhaerebunt fini quem in hac vita sibi praestiterunt, scilicet Deo. Ergo et animae malorum immobiliter inhaerebunt fini quem sibi elegerunt."

it would appear that our 'new' theological approach can be found in Aquinas. Glorieux is a model of inspired research in this field of the history of theology" (p. 173). This passage shows a laudable desire for continuity with the older masters of Christian theology, but it is hardly justified. The words I have italicized, and indeed the passage as a whole, show the hardening of hypothesis into fact: of Glorieux's interpretation of what St. Thomas must imply, into Boros' assertion that Thomas actually says it. (At another place Boros in his German text thus translates the dictum of Damascene: "Der menschliche Tod ist der Entscheidungssituation der Engel ähnlich"; his translator [cf. note on p. 182] refuses this interpretation, which would give in English, as he says: "Human death is a situation similar to the situation of the angels' decision.") In fact, the parallel in Damascene's sentence and in Thomas' use of it makes man's death and the angel's fall function as the starting point for a state of immobile adherence to evil; that the choice which in angel and man led to this state must be of the same nature is neither said nor necessarily implied.

St. Thomas is important in all of this only because it is to him that Glorieux and later Boros appeal for a philosophico-theological basis for interpreting the "moment of death" as being both the first moment of the soul's release from the mortal body and also a moment in man's pilgrimage, a moment in which he can still decide his destiny. The discussion of whether Glorieux's views are justified in the light of Thomas' meaning, is likewise intended here simply to bring to light the real issues involved in the final-option theory. For it may be objected that I am simply putting up one interpretation of Thomas against another, or, more broadly, opposing a philosophico-theological hypothesis on the grounds that, like any theological hypothesis, it does not seem to explain all the data. I do not think the matter is so simple as this. Rather, there is a primary datum which must be respected at all costs: the scriptural kerygma already referred to on the decisive importance of man's time on earth, "in the body." The primary problems which this datum sets up for us, especially the justice of God in punishing eternally, are mysteries in any event. Other problems, such as that of the *fides damnati* or of the just man dying with unrepented venial sins, are secondary ones excogitated by theologians and quite possibly illusory ones, and in any event susceptible of other solutions. What is at stake in the final-option theory is, in the last analysis, the seriousness of human life. Glorieux and Boros, of course, like all theologians, explicitly intend to maintain this; the question is whether they manage to do so. Glorieux thinks that he does so, and that he does justice to the scriptural stress on the importance of man's life on earth, by giving the latter an important influence

on the final choice made; but he has to allow that the whole course of a man's life on earth may be reversed in this final choice, and that a man's life on earth is thus not necessarily decisive for his eternal fate.

Even within the terms of the theory itself I am not sure that the problem of freedom has been resolved. In the theory the final act alone has the requisite clarity and freedom for a total commitment to God or a total rejection of God. This is, after all, the precise argument for the existence of such a final choice. Yet it seems to lead to a dilemma. If, on the one hand, a man's previous choices during life are not fully free, yet for Glorieux and Boros they truly weigh upon his freedom in the moment of final choice, and thus this freedom would itself seem to be limited: the final option would therefore seem to have to be either an angelic choice (with no history behind it) or else a choice upon which a previous history truly weighs and which thus becomes a limited freedom, not really parallel to the angel's. If, on the other hand, a man's previous choices were genuinely personal choices, able to engage an eternal destiny, even if not all these choices had the same depth and intensity, then the final option would seem to differ only in degree, not in kind, and thus to be unnecessary.

Boros, as I have already indicated, takes a more immediately philosophical approach to the problem of death, and his book can legitimately be said to be a book on the question "What is it for man to be a person?" He finds by his analysis of Blondel (on willing), Maréchal (on knowing), Bergson (on memory), and Marcel (on loving), that death plays a decisive role in the development of man as a person. Whether these philosophers would accept an interpretation of "death as a personal act," such as Boros proposes (with "dying" understood as an act of a disincarnate spirit), others more competent than I must judge. In any event, Boros' conception of man as a person is, to me, a disturbing one. Is man to act in a fully personal way only when he is released from the mortal body? Are temporality and historicity a sort of "fall" of man or, more properly, of the human spirit?

One reflection of this almost monist view of man (disowned indeed, but, it seems to me, at work here nonetheless) is that death as violence done to man, while acknowledged, plays almost no role (Boros is made by his translator to say that the definition of death as separation of soul from body is "totally inadequate" [p. 171], which presumably would mean that the definition is simply false; B. in fact says that the definition is "sehr unvollkommen," but the mistranslation symbolically reflects the little place which death as passivity has, in Boros' theory, in determining and limiting the personal activity of "dying"). Yet the problem, it seems to me, of explaining death as a personal act is, in part at least, a problem of balancing off death

as passivity, as violence thrust upon man, against death as a personal act, as a "becoming separated" but one that is dominated by active acceptance (or rejection). How in Boros' view do the two facets of death unite, so as to admit the passive and limiting side of death while preserving the kind of total freedom in the "moment of death" which he requires? (James Collins, in the review mentioned earlier, sums up by saying that Boros' book and José Ferrater Mora's *Being and Death* [also reviewed] "are related as the perfective and limiting interpretations of human dying." This seems to me accurately to characterize the stress in Boros' book.)

Once this passive side of death is noted, the question arises whether the active domination of death need be, or can be, located precisely at the "moment of dying" (however this moment—as a moment of the *status viae*—might be acceptably defined in a non-Glorieux manner). I would ask further, in this context, whether Karl Rahner has rightly been drawn by Boros into the orbit of his final-option theory. The phrase "final option," if I am not mistaken, does not occur in Rahner's *On the Theology of Death*. Rahner seems rather to think of "dying as a personal act," not as a moment at the end but as an act or series of acts that occur during life.¹⁰ At any rate, this seems to me a more profitable line of thought.

But does it not leave unresolved Boros' initial problem, namely, that man is not fully free in the acts of his mortal life? It does—if we accept the problem as Boros states it. But is the problem rightly stated, or is it not prejudiced from the outset? Is not Boros' model for human personal action being taken from the angelic sphere, from the idea of a disincarnate soul as alone fully free? One might ask, indeed, whether even in the angelic sphere or in the realm of disincarnate human spirit the very idea of an act of absolute, that is, exhaustive, freedom on the part of a creature *in the supernatural order* is not a chimerical one. God's will, which we cannot rationalize, determines the grace given to man on earth (the grace, therefore, which lies behind all the free acts which a man brings to his final option as conceived by Glorieux and Boros); it determines also the supernatural light and strength given to the angelic spirit in its choice and to the human spirit in the choice Glorieux and Boros envisage for it. Even if we consider the *potentia ordinata* of God, must we not say that He can by His grace always give the possibility of a different choice? In other words, in the supernatural order every choice not made in the light of an immediate intuition of the Good (vision of God) is subject to revision. This leaves us, as far as the mystery of God's justice is

¹⁰ Cf. also the entries "Death" and "End" in Rahner-Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary* (New York, 1965).

concerned, back where we started; but perhaps we must be content to remain there.

At any rate, I do not think we ought to look for an answer in what seems to me, in the last analysis, an antihuman view of the freedom of the human person, such as Boros offers. To bring these reflections (which have said nothing of the many good things in Boros' book) to an end: Rather than a theory of final option to rescue man, what is needed is a reflection on man's temporality and historicity as the context in which a genuine personal freedom matures. This does not mean that in death man as a person does not come to a new and radically more perfect fulfilment and fruition (if he has chosen the good). It means simply that human life is a place where a freedom commensurate with an eternal destiny is possible.

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