

This article was downloaded by: [Universiteit Twente]

On: 18 June 2013, At: 07:38

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Religion, State and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/crss20>

### On Freedom and Responsibility: Discovering the Human as a Transcendent Being

Ciano Aydin

Published online: 18 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Ciano Aydin (2013): On Freedom and Responsibility: Discovering the Human as a Transcendent Being, Religion, State and Society, DOI:10.1080/09637494.2013.803907

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2013.803907>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## On Freedom and Responsibility: Discovering the Human as a Transcendent Being

CIANO AYDIN

### ABSTRACT

*This paper takes as a starting point the letter of Cardinal Angelo Sodano which is used as a preface in the various publications and translations of the Catholic Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. In this letter Sodano highlights an aspect that he believes deserves special attention: 'men and women are invited above all to discover themselves as transcendent beings, in every dimension of their lives, including those related to social, economic and political contexts'. In my philosophical investigation of this notion of transcendence I take my inspiration from an author who, although accepted as a Church Father within the Catholic Church since 1920, has not yet received much attention either within and outside the Catholic tradition: St Ephrem the Syrian. I also compare Ephrem's view of transcendence with that of St Augustine. I explain how the recognition of our own transcendence leads to the acknowledgment of a particular kind of freedom and responsibility. In order to specify these notions I also investigate their relation to the concepts of vulnerability and dignity.*

### Introduction

After completion of the Catholic Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Compendium, 2004), Cardinal Angelo Sodano, who was at the time the Vatican's secretary of state, wrote a letter in which he emphasised the significance of this systematically compiled manual and highlighted the most important pillars of the Christian social doctrine. This letter serves as a preface to the various publications and translations of the Compendium. In his letter Sodano stresses that the social doctrine is not grounded on specific articles of faith but is based on natural law, which is engraved in every human conscience and which ought to appeal to everyone who possesses moral sentiment. In this pursuit for fundamental principles and values, which is naturally adopted by every conscientious human being and which is incited by the Compendium, there is, according to Sodano, one aspect that deserves special attention: 'men and women are invited above all to discover themselves as transcendent beings, in every dimension of their lives, including those related to social, economic and political contexts'. Discovering themselves as transcendent beings is thus for human beings not only of theoretical importance, but also a necessary and fundamental condition for adequately practising their various roles in social, economic and political settings.

In this paper I explore this idea of the human being as a transcendent being and its social implications, focusing particularly on the notions of freedom and responsibility. In order to

specify these notions I also investigate their relation to the concepts of vulnerability and dignity. My philosophical analysis aims to explain how transcendence should not be conceived as a debunked pre-modern metaphysical notion but rather as a dimension of our human condition that needs to be acknowledged as a necessary condition for every form of (Christian) social and moral practice. In my investigation I take my inspiration from an author who, although accepted as a Church Father within the Catholic Church since 1920, has not yet received much attention either within or outside the Catholic tradition: St Ephrem the Syrian (*ca* 306–373).<sup>1</sup> The increasing number of translations, dissertations and other academic studies since the 1980s, especially within faculties that study Eastern Christianity, does indicate however that there is a growing interest in his teachings. For the Syriac Orthodox Church Ephrem is one of the most important hymnographers and theologians. I shall shed more light on the notion of transcendence and its social implications by comparing Ephrem's perspective with that of St Augustine.

The arrangement of this article is as follows. In order to gain a first impression of the meaning and relevance of human transcendence in the context described above, I first give a brief sketch of how this notion is elaborated in the Compendium. Then I situate Ephrem within the Christian tradition and thinking, and discuss his so-called symbolism of oppositions and the way he outlines how human transcendence should be approached within that framework. Then I explain how this awareness of our own transcendence leads to the acknowledgment of a certain vulnerability. Next I discuss how Ephrem bases free will on the notion of 'vulnerable transcendence' and in what sense human dignity is derived from humanity's free will. In the last section I elaborate on how this relation between vulnerability, dignity and freedom brings about a particular notion of responsibility.

### **The Significance of Transcendence in the Compendium**

Since transcendence is, as Cardinal Sodano indicates, of significance in all dimensions of human life, it implicitly or explicitly plays a role within all the themes that are elaborated in the Compendium. However, in chapter 3 of part I, explicit and extensive attention is paid to this notion of transcendence. The human being, we read in this chapter, is different from all the other beings because of his special bond with God: as the living image of God he can never completely coincide with his earthly existence or actual state, and this grants him<sup>2</sup> an ineradicable freedom and absolute dignity. This special tie, however, not only bestows on human beings freedom and dignity but also induces them to acknowledge, respect and further shape this freedom and dignity within the various fields (social, political, economic) in which they operate (Compendium, 2004, 108). Hence the transcendent state of the human being not only endows him with ineradicable freedom and dignity but also invokes an irrefutable responsibility, not only towards himself and other persons but also towards other creatures. Human beings have the possibility and, therefore, the responsibility to build respectful relations with living creatures (other human beings, animals, plants) as well as with inorganic things (Compendium, 2004, 113).

The human being as an image of God, however, not only bears resemblance to God, but is also different from God. This difference expresses itself in an extremely negative form in original sin, in which the human being tries to radically cross all the boundaries that are an intrinsic dimension of being a creature of God (Compendium, 2004, 115). Although the human being does not completely coincide with his factuality, that is, with his present state (including all the roles he plays in society), and possesses a certain degree of dominion over himself and other creatures, that freedom also enables abuse if he considers himself as the absolute master and commander of truth and the moral law. The human being is free, but that freedom is not unlimited and can be realised only within the borders that are

determined by an objective law of nature, which prohibits the violation of the dignity and integrity of other creatures (Compendium, 2004, 138). Only if the human being is able to develop a right attitude towards God, that is, if he is able to interpret and cultivate his transcendent status in the right way, will he succeed in developing adequate relations with his social and natural environment (Compendium, 2004, 142, 143).

We can thus conclude that the invitation to discover ourselves as transcendent beings is indeed, as highlighted by Cardinal Sodano, of crucial importance for an adequate realisation of our freedom and responsibility in the various settings in which we live and work. If a correct interpretation of transcendence also implies that the borders of our freedom should be taken into account, then a necessary condition for adequately carrying out our social and moral tasks must be, as we shall see, to find a right *measure* in our attitude towards ourselves and our environment.

### Ephrem the Syrian

Although Ephrem<sup>3</sup> is considered to be part of the Oriental Orthodox tradition, it is anachronistic to compare or contrast his thinking with Catholic doctrines. Ephrem, a poet and theologian who was born in 306 in Nisibis (the modern south-eastern Turkish town of Nusaybin, on the border with Syria), lived long before the Great Schism of 1054, the rupture between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. The schisms that arose as a result of the declarations of the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), and led to the formation of what are called the Oriental Orthodox Churches, also took place after Ephrem's death. Even the division of the Roman Empire in 395 into a Western, Latin-speaking and an Eastern, Greek-speaking branch, which heralded a growing rift between Christian Churches in East and West, occurred after Ephrem's death. Hence Ephrem's thinking cannot be assessed against that background but should rather be seen as part of the very beginning of the development of Christianity and of the first Christian Church.

As the Christian Church began to develop there was an issue that heavily stirred emotions, and that led to the first of seven Ecumenical Councils, namely the First Council of Nicaea in 325. Here the first contours of the official doctrine of the Christian Church of that time and of later Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches were established. The most important issue that led to this Council was the turmoil that was caused by the doctrine defended by Arius, in which the dogma of the divine nature of Jesus Christ was rejected.

For Ephrem, who was 'only' a deacon in the church hierarchy, this discussion was not only an opportunity to present his view on the relation between God and Jesus but also an important breeding-ground for developing his thoughts on the relation between God and the human being. His anti-Arian polemic is elaborated foremostly in his *Hymns on Faith* (see Beck, 1955). According to Ephrem, the Arians, in their extremely rational approach to God, do not take the limits of human knowledge and human capacities into account. As a consequence, they destroy their 'research object' and distance themselves from it. Ephrem compares them with the Pharisees who, according to him, destroyed their very objective by the questions they posed: 'As searchers of truth, they fell from the truth. As seekers of verity, in seeking it, they destroyed it' (E1, 7:7, 9, trans. in Shepardson, 2002).

Although it sometimes seems, at least at first sight, as if Ephrem repudiates every form of rational inquiry about God in favour of simple naive faith, further investigation proves that his view is more sophisticated (see Brock, 1992, p. 27). His aim is finding a right measure in our approach to God, a measure that does not provide us easy solutions but rather reveals and explicates the paradoxical character of every statement concerning transcendence. His stance is, in the end, about persevering that paradoxical character. This precarious venture

that the human being finds on his path sheds, as we shall see, a decisive light on his situation and on his relationships with his fellow human beings and other creatures.

From Ephrem's perspective, then, Arianism cannot and should not be challenged by using pure logical counter-arguments. Otherwise Ephrem would apply the same method that he finds so condemnable in Arianism. Ephrem does not provide a logical proof against the pretension of Arianism to fathom in a rational manner the mystery of Father and Son but tries to make his audience sensitive about this mystery by using different rhetorical techniques. The fact that Ephrem in his writings does not address the Arian or the Jew but 'preaches for his own parish' underlines the fact that his main goal is not to persuade deviant others of his theological doctrines. His aim is not in the first place to provide information, but rather his speeches are a form of initiation and conservation of the recently established, vulnerable unity of his own community (see Botha, 1989, esp. p. 21). Although those circumstances might make a more poetic approach even more pressing, the most important reason why Ephrem chooses to use symbolic language is his conviction that it is the most suitable 'access' to his 'research object'.

In the context of this objective it is not surprising that Ephrem often uses arguments that appeal to the sentiment of his readers. Besides this, we frequently find arguments that are based on analogy where comparisons with exemplary behaviour must incite similar behaviour. Further, he uses arguments that derive their force from an authority, often a Biblical figure, whose exemplary behaviour is contrasted with the incorrect behaviour of, in this case, Arianism. His main line of reasoning is characterised by a symbolism of antitheses and oppositions, where the aim is continuously to find the right middle between, on the one hand, what we still can comprehend and should do and, on the other hand, what goes beyond our understanding and our capacities. His use of images that illustrate how the Divine reveals and conceals itself at the same time should not be understood as sheer literary tools for producing 'theological poetry' but rather have the performative objective of letting us 'feel' something of the Divine and of our relation to it, which is that of transcendence (see Den Biesen, 2006, pp. 33f., a book my Ephrem interpretation strongly relies upon; Brock, 1992, pp. 53–60).

The human being, as an image of God, also finds the irreducible discrepancy that characterises every utterance about the transcendent in himself. In the next section, I want to explore this uncomfortable transcendence further, and show how the awareness of the border that characterises every experience of transcendence can lead to the recognition of our own insufficiency and vulnerability, which also has consequences for how we should relate to our social and natural environment.

### **Transcendence and Vulnerability**

For Ephrem the whole of creation is a testament to God. In all things we can find, as he states in the following hymn, a mark of God: 'Anywhere you look, his symbol is there; and wherever you read, you will find his types. For by him were created all creatures, and he engraved his symbols upon his possessions' (E2, 20:12, 1–4, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 25; see also Beck, 1955, p. 70). This view is similar to that of a slightly younger contemporary of Ephrem who had a great influence on the development of Christianity in the western world: St Augustine. In Augustine's *Confessions* we read:

And I replied to all these things which stand around the door of my flesh: 'You have told me about my God, that you are not he. Tell me something about him.'  
And with a loud voice they all cried out, 'He made us.' My question had come

from my observation of them, and their reply came from their beauty of order.  
(Augustine, 2002, X, vi, 9)

This step that Augustine takes is logically not unproblematic. The beauty of the order of things might fill us with admiration and astonishment. It does not, however, necessarily refer to the existence of God (and then I leave aside the ugliness and disorder that the world also has to offer us). It is problematic to logically infer, from the visible composition of the world, that there is something like an invisible creator. Camus has expressed in a masterly manner that the movement upward from the immanent to the transcendent requires a leap that cannot be justified rationally (Camus, 1955). That we are not able to find an explanation of things in the things themselves is not a sufficient reason to adopt a God that can fill that gap.

Before I return to Ephrem, I want to illustrate through a short discussion of Augustine that my goal is not to come up with a *logical* deduction of the transcendent from the immanent.<sup>4</sup> It is true that Augustine writes that the things that the human being encounters in the world convey to him ‘We are not your God; seek above us’. That, however, does not indicate that this confrontation with the things in the world *logically* implies that God has made them. That step is not evident but can be taken only by somebody who has become sensitive to experiencing things in that manner. In Augustine’s words:

The creatures will not alter their voice – that is, their beauty of form – if one man simply sees what another both sees and questions, so that the world appears one way to this man and another to that. It appears the same way to both; but it is mute to this one and it speaks to that one. Indeed, it actually speaks to all, but only they understand it who compare the voice received from without with the truth within. (Augustine, 2002, X, vi, 10)

For Augustine, desire is of crucial importance in this context: ‘rise, seek, sigh, pant with desire, and knock at what is shut’ (Augustine, 1873, Tractate XVIII, 7); ‘Longing is the very bosom of the heart. We shall attain, if with all our power we give way to our longing’ (Augustine, 1873, Tractate XL, 10). Those who do not desire remain mute for God: ‘your deepest desire is indeed the desire for God’ (Augustine, 1847, Psalm 127:9). Desire is a combination of hope and love. It is craving for things that are absent now but that we expect to see some day. This desire, however, is not being prompted by the suffering from which the human being wants to escape. For Augustine, precisely the opposite is the case: this desire is instigated by the insatiable and endless love for life, by the recognition that there is a richness of possibilities that could be discovered. To capture ourselves in ourselves means that we deprive ourselves of this prospect and, with that, from what makes us human. Because the human being is, in contrast to other (living) creatures, a being that can rise above and point beyond itself, the receptivity for transcendence is a fundamental dimension of being human. To deny this is, as expressed aptly by Safranski, to betray transcendence (Safranski, 2005, p. 45). However, not everybody would go as far as Augustine and ultimately embrace God; many modern authors – think for example of Nietzsche – leave the place that transcendence signifies in principle open. Nevertheless, that desire is an essential dimension of the human being and that in desire the urge is revealed not to coincide with ourselves but to anticipate something that is beyond our limits, is difficult to deny.

In this desire we can recognise something of our insufficiency. In Augustine’s words: ‘For why shouldst thou desire to lay hold of the true, if thou hast the true already?’ (Augustine, 1873, Tractate XXII, 3). In the attempt to rise above oneself, one is necessarily

confronted with the limits of what one can know and do. One cannot have it both ways: if we had everything within our control, there would be no desire. This lack of control is revealed further in the structure of desire: desire is not an activity but is rather characterised by passivity, by being attracted by something that we have no power over. This passivity is twofold: we cannot help *that* we are attracted by something and we cannot (completely) control *what* does and does not attract us.

Augustine finds the source of the desire for transcendence ultimately in the love of God for the human being. Human desire is a response to the love of God: ‘I call on thee, my God, my Mercy, who madest me and didst not forget me, though I was forgetful of thee. I call thee into my soul, which thou didst prepare for thy reception by the desire which thou inspirest in it’ (Augustine, 2002, XIII, i, 1). By adequately responding to the things that surround us, we answer the love of God that reverberates in them. Once again not everybody would go along with Augustine this far. Nevertheless many people would acknowledge that going beyond our limits and discovering new possibilities requires an attentive, careful and indeed even loving disposition, a disposition in which we take our place in a bigger whole into account and adequately respond to what is already there. This is the case when our aim is finding the solution for a scientific problem, trying to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, or maintaining a good marriage.

A similar line of thought can be found in Ephrem. Like Augustine, Ephrem asks himself if and to what extent the human being can find traces or signs in the world or in himself that refer to something that is beyond the limits of his knowledge and capacities. Although Ephrem’s audience is already devout and his goal is not to persuade non-believers by rational arguments in order to convert them to Christianity, the way he investigates the (im)possibility of the interaction between an invisible God and a seeking human being provides interesting leads to further explore our problem of transcendence. Ephrem seems to focus even more than Augustine on the uncomfortable and paradoxical quest that is characteristic for addressing God, a quest that, as we shall see, can and should never find a complete closing. This paradoxical character of addressing transcendence reveals an important dimension of its nature and the place of the human being within a bigger whole.

Ephrem often illustrates the problem of addressing God on the basis of a struggle between what he calls ‘word’ and ‘silence’, a struggle that is demonstrated in various texts and by using a range of metaphors and parables (see Brock, 1992, pp. 26–29). This spectacle not only underlines that, in his reference to God, the human being should always be aware of the limits of his cognitive capacities, but also reveals an important dimension of the awkward and vulnerable position of the human being in the face of a world that is never completely manifest, a world that never completely reveals its secrets. Ephrem’s *Teaching Song on the Church 9* in which the above-mentioned struggle is sketched on the basis of a dialogue between reason and love, provides, as Den Biesen (2006, pp. 118–46) meticulously elaborates, a particularly illuminating image of the way the human being – in this case Ephrem himself – is struggling with the limits of what he can know and do. Ephrem starts his *Teaching Song* by admitting that he does not know how to relate to his beloved God. He acknowledges that his sense of God, as well as his self-knowledge, confront him with difficult questions. His reason immediately reacts to his ponderings and urges him to act in accordance with his weak nature and to be quiet about things that are beyond his understanding. From another angle, however, his love comes to his rescue and refers to John the Baptist, who by virtue of love and courage ‘asked [Jesus] for the hidden secret [the divine mystery] and received a revealed explanation’ (E3, 9:4,6, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 336). In a reaction to this recovered optimism, his reason, now in rage, proclaims to Ephrem that he is not able to come up with an explanation even for visible things, let alone

the invisible. His reason even summons Ephrem to be quiet when it comes to understanding self-knowledge:

In the womb you had no self-awareness, either of what or of where you were. In Sheol, too, you will not know where your body is, and in sleep you are all astray; and like a wave in the sea your mind drifts around in prayer. Don't talk nonsense lest you astray; offer praise, recollected in silence!' (E3, 9:5, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 336; see also Murray, 1980)

This duel between Ephrem's reason and his love goes on for a long time: his love repeatedly encourages him and points him at exemplary people who, as a result of their love and boldness, have opened doors that in the beginning seemed to be closed. However, every time Ephrem thinks that he gains some right to speak, his reason ruthlessly reprimands him. As a consequence, Ephrem falls into despair until his love catches his fall again.

It is remarkable and interesting that the struggle between reason and love is not resolved (see Den Biesen, 2006, p. 141). Ultimately Ephrem does not choose for one of the contesting parties but blesses the one who knows how to cherish both qualities. Reason and love do not exclude one another but are together the two keys that must enable a relation, or better, a certain proximity to God. In Ephrem's words: 'Like masters they gave me the measures for silence and speech, that my mind might not sink into silence nor yet in speech be so audacious to examine and explore' (E3, 9:17, 3–5, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 339).

The objective of Ephrem's symbolic language is to illustrate a facet of God's mystery without destroying it. The symbol uncovers and conceals at the same time. We can find another edifying example of this in one of his *Hymns on Faith* (E1, 77:12–14). In this text the unity of Father and Son is compared with the unity of the tree and its fruits; this image makes a certain facet of that unity conceivable but without uncovering the mystery of the Divine (see Botha, 1993, p. 23). The experience of transcendence is a paradoxical matter: in manifesting itself, it withdraws itself. This is the case not only in our relation to God but regarding all reality.

Ephrem's symbolism intends above all to shed some light on how the human being should find his place in a world that he can never completely comprehend: he must find a balance between silence and speech. Ephrem introduces here a measure or a sense of proportion (see also Den Biesen, 2006, p. 159; Brock, 1992, pp. 67–71) that implies that the opposition that has just been described cannot be overcome by the human being but should rather be endured: 'I thought and talked about you, but without delimiting you; I then grew weak and fell silent, but without losing you' (E1, 32:6, 1–2, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 157). Enduring this border experience implies accepting the finitude of the human being but without totally surrendering to it. Belief in a transcendent being that completely abolishes the immanence of the human being denies the human condition. A characteristic of transcendence, as human beings can experience it, is that it is a movement that takes place *in* the world (see Heyde, 2000, pp. 169–74). Although the human being can develop perspectives that go beyond all expectations, it is possible to do so only within the horizon of the world in which he lives. Moreover, those insights will ultimately, if they are continuously verified, be taken up and become part of the actual, concrete world. This last element indicates that the world as such never completely coincides with itself, and, therefore, is potentially always a movement of transcendence.

Ephrem emphasises, just like Augustine, that the world is unfathomable, that more knowledge does not eliminate the mystery that surrounds us but rather intensifies it.

There will, for example, always be an unbridgeable gap between knowing *that* something exists and entirely comprehending *why* it exists (see E4, 41:7–22, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 362), and just like Augustine, Ephrem also finds the strength to not be discouraged by this in love. Although we always will have more questions than answers, we must not surrender to the fear we have of the incomprehensible but be grateful for what has been disclosed: Ephrem undoubtedly implicitly refers here also to the incarnation. Here speech is, in the line of Augustine, justified by the idea that the love of God for the human being should be answered: ‘Blessed is he who gave humankind the word of the mouth, so that we might thank him with it’ (E4, 9:14, 7, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 339). By talking of boldness in this context, Ephrem emphasises the hazardous character of this speaking, as well as its oppositional or antithetical relation to our limited reason. We can never completely grasp what we are talking about.

Ephrem not only stresses the importance of the tension between what is unveiled and what remains hidden, which is an essential element of transcendence, but also illustrates that it should be intensified maximally. This view has consequences for the status of the human being: if the human being recognises that the mystery that surrounds us cannot be eradicated, he must also acknowledge his fundamental finitude and vulnerability, which cannot be overcome by more knowledge but rather will be strengthened and deepened by it. In the next sections I shall further develop this view by, first, discussing how this tensile status of the human being, which is a dimension of his uncomfortable relation to transcendence, sheds light on what it means for a human being to have free will and how by virtue of this freedom the human being possesses dignity. Then I will try to explain in what sense this combination of vulnerability, freedom and dignity culminates in the idea that the human being should take responsibility for himself and his environment.

### **Free Will and Human Dignity**

In a letter to his friend Hypatius, Ephrem states that it is by virtue of the word that God has given us that we have a certain resemblance to him:

By the word, in fact, we are the likeness of the One who gives it, because by means of it we have impulse and thought for good deeds. And not only for good deeds: we also learn about God, the Fountain of good deeds, by means of the word, which is a gift from him. (E4, 21:18–22:27, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 346).

This word not only enables us to choose what is good but also to not choose what is good: ‘For the Deity gave us the word which is authoritative like itself, so that the authoritative word might serve our authoritative free will’ (E4, 21:18–22:27, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 346). The word that the human being has received from God enables him to seek the truth and to try to live by it but also to renounce it. The relation between the human being as a likeness of God and free will can also be found in Ephrem’s commentary on Genesis: ‘And God spoke: Let us make man in our image, since he has such a great power that he can obey us, *if it pleases him*’ (my italics) (Janson and Van Rompay, 1993, p. 51). We find here the tension that characterises the human condition, yet in another form. Although Ephrem justifies the likeness of the human being to God by referring to his intellectual qualities, what is ultimately decisive is the capacity of the human being to choose out of free will for the good. Ephrem, in this context, puts even more emphasis on free will than Augustine, for whom the human intellect seems in the end to be more important (see Murray, 1999, pp. 68–70): ‘With this specific exegesis [of the Genesis text] Ephrem makes

free will the keystone of his view of the human being' (Janson, 1998, p. 208; see also Mathews and Amar, 1994, for an insightful translation of Ephrem's Genesis).

The human being derives his greatness and dignity from his free will. It is, however, also by virtue of free will that the human being commits sin. Again we find here Ephrem's oppositional and tensile symbolism. The tension between the immanence that ties the human being to the natural world and the transcendence that continuously alienates him from it is now applied to the dividedness that the human being finds in himself because of his free will and the evil that becomes possible with it. Free will is for Ephrem the power that makes him resemble God but it is also the source of all evil: 'This is, in fact, the root of [all] evil things. For when there is no voluntary evil, [all] evil things come to an end' (E4, 37:12–38:2, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 359).

To shed more light on Ephrem's notion of free will and its relation to evil, I shall elaborate on his analysis of free will in his letter to Hypatius a little further. In this letter Ephrem explains that the free will is something that is in a miraculous way divided in itself: 'This is a wonder, that though the will is one, two tastes that are not homogeneous are found in its homogeneity' (E4, 34:4–35:9, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 356). Ephrem uses different terms to characterise that dividedness: 'two parts', 'two halves', 'two flavours', 'two thoughts', 'many views' (see also Den Biesen, 2006, p. 261). Without that dividedness there would be no free will: 'For I wonder how one and the same thing both subdues itself and is subdued by itself. But know that if this was not so, mankind would have no authoritative free will' (E4, 34:4–35:9, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 356). We have free will because we are at the same time able to will and not to will, and because these wills are in continuous struggle with one another.

Ephrem relates the dividedness of the will immediately to the possibility of evil. If free will did not exist, it would make no sense to speak of Divine laws and commandments. An animal that is virtually completely determined by its instincts is never confronted with the question of good and evil. The awareness of good and evil manifests itself, therefore, by virtue of the struggle between the different parts of the will. Also in this respect, it is difficult not to be tempted to draw a parallel with Augustine. Augustine's famous anecdote about the pear tree that is being plundered by him and his friends, not because he has a craving for pears but because his will urges him to do something precisely because it is prohibited, illustrates aptly the idea that it does not make any sense to speak of evil if free will is not presupposed. Because free will is a necessary condition for the possibility of evil, Ephrem repudiates the notion of a fixed evil nature: 'But if the evil which is in us is evil and cannot become good, and if also the good in us is good and cannot become evil, then those good and bad promises which the law makes are superfluous' (E4, 36:26–37:12 (see also 37:12–38:2), trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 359). This also means that a part of the will can never completely dominate the whole constitution of the will; the struggle between different parts of the will is a necessary condition for the existence of free will.

Again we see here that the human being is characterised by an oppositional, tensile relation that cannot be overcome. If the struggle between the parts of the will came to an end, the existence of the will would be destroyed, and with that, the possibility of taking responsibility for our own actions. In addition, Ephrem emphasises the unfathomable character of free will: complete insight into free will would bring the struggle to an end and, with that, destroy our sense of responsibility. Giving an explanation for the struggle between two or more parts of my will would imply that I can consider myself a neutral outsider and can, in one way or another, escape responsibility for the outcome of that struggle. I shall elaborate the relation between free will and responsibility more extensively in the next section.

Ephrem wants to make sure that it is clear that it is impossible to deny our free will (see E4, 38:19–40:15, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, pp. 360f.). A rational argument that he strongly underlines is the following: denying that I have free will is impossible because precisely by denying it I acknowledge that I am free to take a certain position, and, therefore, that I have free will. We also find a more empirical argument. For example, if you call somebody a slave, he will immediately react with irritation and will try to give various reasons in order to prove that he is free; even somebody who really is a slave is inclined to react in this way. Sometimes Ephrem explains and rejects the denial of free will from a more moral perspective: people who deny their free will have often already lost the battle with their evil will and deny the freedom of will in order to hide the fact that they have a weak will. The affirmation of free will seems always to go together with the recognition of the existence of an internal struggle without a pre-established outcome. The choice can never be pre-determined by a fixed nature, an external force or one of the parts of the will; it must be always possible that a decision by one part of the will can be challenged by another part of the will.

The domination over the creation that the human being has by virtue of his likeness to God is, therefore, based on externally unbounded human freedom, which can be denied neither by oneself nor by other people. This condition provides human beings with absolute dignity: they cannot be reduced to a pre-given nature or subjected to laws that were not chosen by them. In Ephrem's words:

the power of free will is so great, while our mouth is unable to do it full justice; our frail mouth has confessed that it is unable to state its authoritative will. For it is a free will which subjects even God to investigation and rebuke, on account of its authoritative nature. (E4, 40:15–41:7, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 362)

By virtue of their free will human beings are able to transcend every (political) structure that attempts to subordinate them. With Nietzsche we can say that the human being is the not (yet) fixed animal (*'das noch nicht festgestellte Tier'*), the animal with a lack of instincts and specialised organs, a 'lack' that enables him to choose his own path.

That the human being is free to choose how he wants to live does not mean that he can randomly determine what is a good or a bad choice. Although Ephrem's explanation for this is expressed in strongly religious language, it could also be elaborated in a more profane direction. Precisely because human conduct is not pre-determined, the question 'what is a good life?' can be raised. That a choice by a person can never completely determine his will in a certain direction, but can always be doubted by another voice, by another part of his will – possibly initiated by another person – means that every choice is subject to criticism. Criticism presupposes a criterion that can never be completely controlled by the contesting parties. That every criterion, in its turn, can also be subjected to criticism does not change the fact that that criticism must also presuppose a criterion that cannot be dependent on the wishes or preferences of (one of the) contesting parties; and so on *ad infinitum*. Real criticism presupposes, therefore, a criterion that resists every attempt to be controlled or possessed. This criterion refers to what in traditional terminology is called 'the Truth'. I have argued elsewhere that this view must germinate a rehabilitation of the significance of ideals: since a real belief expresses a willingness to act, and action is always purposeful action, every critical position ultimately presupposes an (objective and ultimate) ideal that it wants to realise (see Aydin, 2008, 2009).

This view on the relation between freedom, criticism and a non-subjective, transcendent criterion does not necessarily have to be based on a Christian perspective. One could ultimately come to the same conclusion from a non-Christian orientation. It is, however, a

fact that the Christian tradition does offer a great amount of rich sources in which this view has been deeply investigated. To ignore these would be a waste, especially in our era. Today respect for human autonomy is valued highly but at the same time the view is becoming ever stronger that this respect can only be upheld if we acknowledge that freedom is not just doing what you please. In this context the Christian tradition can provide important guidelines.

The view that freedom is not unbounded but rather expresses the need for a non-subjective criterion, or in Christian terms that we should stand still before ‘the tree of good and evil’, does not diminish the importance of freedom. On the contrary, this need even indicates that real freedom can be realised only if we accept that there is not such a thing as unrestricted freedom (see Compendium, 2004, 136). Because human beings live in a social context, the expression of the freedom of one individual will always directly or indirectly affect the freedom of other individuals. This indicates that the realisation of freedom is possible only within a community of individuals that in one way or another recognises criteria that apply to everybody. The realisation of freedom requires, therefore, a community in which a form of *summum bonum* is recognised.

This also means that the freedom by virtue of which the human being possesses dignity is a vulnerable freedom. There are a number of historical examples that show that when what is true and good is determined by the wishes and preferences of a particular group, there are disastrous consequences. Although the human being possesses dignity by virtue of his freedom, respect for and protection of that dignity is not automatically guaranteed. In the next section I shall investigate how Ephrem’s teachings about freedom and dignity provide a notion of responsibility that has also not lost its force and relevance in our present time.

### Responsibility

Ephrem does not attempt to prove the existence of the freedom of the will in a theoretical-analytical manner, let alone to fathom it (more about this later on). He rather investigates his own ideas, feelings and state of mind in the hope of finding something that not only applies to him but also clarifies something about the human condition as such. Today we could probably call this method ‘hermeneutical phenomenology’. In his letter to Hypatius, for example, Ephrem reports his considerations and hesitations regarding his decision to write his friend a letter instead of paying him a visit. He describes the struggle between different parts of his will and observes that free will is possible only if the outcome of that struggle is not determined beforehand by a fixed nature or external influences. In addition, there can be free will only if the struggle can never be completely overcome.

Making plausible that we cannot deny our free will is for Ephrem of eminent importance because otherwise the existence of evil (and good) would become impossible (see Den Biesen, p. 263; Brock, 1992, pp. 34–36). Ephrem would not deny that the will of a person could have been developed in a bad direction under influence of different (external) influences (see E4, 40:3–15, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 317). However, it must ultimately be possible to trace back the evil that is the result of a bad education to expressions of wills: expression of wills by the person that does evil and possibly expressions of wills by people who have contributed to the evil actions of that person. Reducing evil to ontological or cosmological forces would for Ephrem, as well as for Augustine, ultimately mean denying it. Evil can for Ephrem, in other words, exist only as a moral phenomenon. His commentary on Genesis illustrates this very clearly. Ephrem does everything to demonstrate that original sin was a result of a free choice on the part of Adam and Eve. He marginalises the role of the snake and the devil, presents the prohibition to eat from

the fruits of that one tree as a command that was not too difficult to obey, explicates that the snake did not seduce Eve by creating an illusion or using magic, underlines that Eve did not put much effort into thinking through the words of the snake, and emphasises that Adam and Eve repeatedly had the opportunity to repent – God granted them a delay, prepared them to repent by letting them hear his footsteps, asked them where they were, asked Adam who enabled them to recognise that they were naked, asked Eve what she had done (Janson and Van Rompay, 1993, pp. 69–72).<sup>5</sup>

The goal of Ephrem's contemplation on free will is clear from the beginning: having a sense of free will comes with not being able to pass on one's responsibility to a pre-given nature, non-human influences or – and Ephrem is especially eager to exclude this possibility – God. That the human being possesses a certain domination means that he has the potential to liberate himself from external restrictions and internal urges and idiosyncrasies. By virtue of the internal tension in their will, which can never be completely dissolved, human beings can critically weigh out different possibilities before making a decision. Real criticism, however, as I have interpreted Ephrem in this respect, always presupposes a criterion that enables making a difference between good and evil, which does not imply that what is good is completely transparent. Nevertheless, free will does confront the human being with the quest to search for what is good and that quest is a real quest only if one acknowledges that good and bad are not completely dependent on subjective preferences of individuals or societies.

Ephrem ultimately seems to reduce all evil to the denial of free will and the quest that it instigates. Human beings are different from other living beings because of their *capacity* to have a sense of the distinction between good and evil. The human domination over creation means for Ephrem, therefore, almost always the opposite of random mastery over and exploitation of other beings. This form of domination might be applied to the relations that we find in the plant and animal kingdoms. The domination that the human being possesses by virtue of his free will is a power that enables him to deviate, act differently, disobey, criticise and organise his world according to his view. These notions have meaning and significance only if it makes a difference which choices are made, if a criterion is presupposed on the basis of which one can make a distinction between good and bad choices. Only if we presuppose a criterion that is independent of subjective preferences can people be held responsible for their actions.

In the texts that I have mentioned above, Ephrem hardly elaborates explicitly the relation between freedom and responsibility, but he does provide some interesting leads. In his commentary on Genesis he seems to understand the relation between human beings and other creatures foremostly in terms of stewardship.<sup>6</sup> Because human beings transcend every material factuality and have a sense of good and evil by virtue of their free will, they have a certain responsibility regarding the course of the world. The fact that a human being never completely coincides with a certain actual situation and can distance himself from his specific position means that he is able to take different possibilities into consideration and to try to find out not only what is good for himself but also what is good for others, and because human beings *can* do this, they *ought* to do it.

The human being can transcend certain given actualities and consider different options only from his concrete situation, from his being-in-the-world, to borrow a term from Heidegger. Although human beings can distance themselves from their situation, that distance is always necessarily co-determined by that situation. A completely free 'bird's eye' view over all things is not achievable for human beings. Ephrem's symbolism of the tension between word and silence, between the disclosed and the concealed, portrays aptly the limits of the human condition: 'For when we know that everything that exists is known and not known, it is through this very knowledge that we acquire the truth' (E4, 42:12–

43:4, trans. in Den Biesen, 2006, p. 363; see also Den Biesen, 2006, p. 275; Brock, 1992, pp. 27f.). Having sense of the difference between good and evil does not imply that we know exactly what we ought to do. This limitation, however – and this is a crucial point – does summon to modesty. Stewardship does not mean subjecting the world to your own will but carefully listening and then judging. In Ephrem's idiom: silence and word. Not only listening but also judging and acting are important: the recognition that the world will never disclose all its secrets may lead to despair. Nevertheless, precisely because we do have a sense of the difference between good and evil, we may hope that we are able to make the right decisions.

This notion of responsibility, however, requires further differentiation. My free will may enable me to have a sense of the difference between good and evil, by virtue of which I can be held responsible for my actions, but the extent to which I take that responsibility seriously and the way I give content to it is also dependent on the specific nature of what is entrusted to me. My responsibility for my kitchen garden is a different responsibility from that for my canary, and my responsibility for my canary is a different responsibility from that for my wife and children. The way I ought to relate to other beings is foremostly dependent on their own specific will and development. Listening well means taking that specific development into account, so that I not only do not obstruct it but, where possible, also stimulate it. Because total insight into that will and that development is not reachable, a certain restraint is required. Here also, however, listening well and a certain restraint do not relieve us of the responsibility of making our own judgments and taking action where needed. If I notice that certain vegetables in my kitchen garden are so aggressive that they obstruct the development of other vegetables, I have to do something. Because I never know for sure if my actions will ultimately have a positive result, some courage is required.

The human being seems to differ in a special way from all the other life forms that we find in the world, and this fact requires a specific responsibility. The development of my tomatoes and the life path of my canary have, to a certain extent, a unique character that I have to take into account, but they also seem to follow a certain pattern. This applies much less to other people. Although other people are the only living beings that I can communicate with in the same language, they will probably remain the greatest enigma for me. A human being never coincides with himself and can, therefore, always completely change his or her course of life. This irreducible indeterminateness of human beings, which they possess by virtue of their free will, grants them a special, vulnerable dignity, a dignity that I can recognise but also deny. The human being escapes every form in which I want to capture him, from every notion with which I want to grasp him, and even from every form in which he tries to capture himself. My responsibility for my fellow human being must then indeed for an important part consist of contributing to the perseverance of his freedom. Only then, to return one last time to the letter of cardinal Sodano, he will be prompted to discover himself as a transcendent being that has a sense of the difference between good and evil.

## Notes

- 1 Syrian is an Aramaic dialect. To prevent confusion with the present country Syria, Syrian Christians use instead of the word 'Syrian' the term 'Suryoyo'; in English the word 'Syriac' is currently used. For a short but clear exposition of the meaning and significance of Syriac and Syriac literature, as well as an overview of the various Syriac Churches, see Brock, 2006.
- 2 For pragmatic reasons I refer to the 'human being' with third person singular masculine adjectives or pronouns (his/him/himself). 'Human being' includes, of course, both sexes.
- 3 See Brock (1992) and Murray (2004) for an excellent exposition of Ephrem's life and works.

- 4 A logical deduction would mean for Ephrem, as we shall see further on, the destruction of the tension that comes with the experience of transcendence, and, hence, of that experience as such.
- 5 For an interesting analysis of this, see Kofsky and Ruzer (2000).
- 6 Robert Murray speaks in this respect of ‘delegated authority’ (see Murray, 1999, pp. 69, 75).

### Notes on Contributor

**Ciano Aydin** is Thomas More professor at Delft University of Technology and assistant professor at the University of Twente, where he is also programme director of the master ‘Philosophy of Science, Technology and Society’. He investigates issues related to identity, (information) technology and religion. Recent publications include: ‘The artifactual mind: overcoming the “inside–outside” dualism in the extended mind thesis and recognizing the technological dimension of cognition’, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (forthcoming); ‘Transcendentie en het innerlijk: over de religieuze dimensie van technologie en de technologische dimensie van religie’ (‘Transcendence and inner life: on the religious dimension of technology and the technological dimension of religion’), *Bijdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology*, 73, 2012, pp. 258–80; ‘Generalizing in a pluralistic society: from Kant’s duty ethics to Peirce’s communitarian ethics of ideals’, *Cognitio*, 12, 2011, pp. 21–35; ‘Müller-Lauter’s Nietzsche’, in A. Woodward (ed.), *Interpreting Nietzsche* (New York, Continuum, 2011), pp. 99–116. Email: o.aydin@utwente.nl

### References

#### (a) Works by Ephrem the Syrian

- E1 *Hymns on Faith*
- E2 *Hymns on Virginity*
- E3 *Teaching Song on the Church*
- E4 *First Discourse for Hypatius*

#### (b) Books, Articles and Documents

- Augustine (2002) *Confessions* (trans. A.C. Outler) (Mineola, Dover Publications) [book], [chapter], [section].
- Augustine (1873) *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St John* (trans. J. Gibb) (Edinburgh, T & T Clark).
- Augustine (1847) *Expositions on the Book of Psalms* (trans. J. Tweed *et al.*) (Oxford, J.H. Parker).
- Aydin, C. (2008) ‘Streven naar idealen in een post-moderne tijd: Charles S. Peirce over ethiek en esthetiek’ (‘Striving for ideals in a post-modern era: Charles S. Peirce on ethics and aesthetics’), *Tijdschrift voor filosofie*, 70, 4, pp. 671–704.
- Aydin, C. (2009) ‘On the significance of ideals: Charles S. Peirce and the good life’, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 45, 3, pp. 422–43.
- Beck, E. (ed.) (1955) *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide (Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vols 154/155; Scriptores Syri, vols 73/74)* (Louvain, Peeters).
- Botha, P.J. (1989) ‘Christology and apology in Ephrem the Syrian’, *Hervormde Theologische Studies*, 45, pp. 19–29.
- Botha, P.J. (1993) ‘Ephrem’s comparison of the Father/Son relationship to the relationship between a tree and its fruit in his hymns *On Faith*’, *Acta Patristica et Byzantina*, 4, pp. 23–32.
- Brock, S. (1992) *The Luminous Eye: the Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem* (Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications).
- Brock, S. (2006) *An Introduction to Syriac Studies* (Piscataway, NJ, Gorgias Press).

- Camus, A. (1955) *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf).
- Compendium (2004) Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html) (last accessed 14 January 2013).
- Den Biesen, K. (2006) *Simple and Bold: Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, NJ, Gorgias Press).
- Heyde, L. (2000) *De maat van de mens: over autonomie, transcendentie en sterfelijkheid (The Measure of the Human Being: Autonomy, Transcendence and Mortality)* (Amsterdam, Boom).
- Janson, A.G.P. (1998) *De Abrahamcyclus in de Genesiscommentaar van Efreem de Syriër (The Abraham Cycle in the Genesis Commentary of Ephrem the Syrian)* (Zoetermeer, Ribberink van der Gang).
- Janson, A.G.P. and Van Rompay, L. (trans. and eds) (1993) *Efreem de Syriër: uitleg van het boek Genesis (Ephrem the Syrian: Explanation of the Book of Genesis)* (Kampen, Kok).
- Kofsky, A. and Ruzer, S. (2000) 'Justice, free will, and divine mercy in Ephrem's Commentary on Genesis 2-3', *Le Muséon*, 113, 3-4, pp. 315-32.
- Mathews, E. and Amar, J. (trans. and eds) (1994) *St Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works* (Washington, DC, The Catholic University of America Press).
- Murray, R. (1980) 'St Ephrem's dialogue of reason and love', *Sobornost incorporating Eastern Churches Review*, 2, 2, pp. 26-40.
- Murray, R. (1999) 'The Ephremic tradition and the theology of the environment', *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, 2, 1, pp. 67-82.
- Murray, R. (2004 [1975]) *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (Piscataway, NJ, Gorgias Press).
- Safranski, R. (2005) *Het kwaad* (trans. M. Wildschut of *Das Böse oder das Drama der Freiheit* (Munich, Hanser, 1997)) (Amsterdam, Olympus).
- Shepardson, C.C. (2002) "'Exchanging reed for reed": mapping contemporary heretics onto Biblical Jews in Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith*', *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*, 5, 1, <http://syrcm.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol5No1/HV5N1Shepardson.html> (last accessed 25 February 2013).