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Saint Augustine and the problem of free will

Saint Augustine carried out the strengthening of Christian theology with philosophical intensity, his ingenuity could compete with the Greek philosophers, among others, he explains the doctrine of the Trinity with brilliant logical steps, the creation out of nothing, the legacy of the original sin, the necessity of God's grace and the freedom of will in his writings. His thoughts are undoubtedly treasures of the Christian philosophy. In my short essay I am introducing his thoughts on the origin of the evil and the freedom of will. In the analysis I mainly lean on the wording of the dialogues entitled *Confessiones* and *De libero arbitrio*. The central problem is basically the following: as God is perfect and good, he cannot create evil, His creations can only be good, however, in the world we experience evil every single day and if it was not created by God, then comes the questions: where does it come from. We may predict Saint Augustine's solution: we, people are responsible for the evil and it is all rooted in the free will. Saint Augustine's answer contains way more than the clarifying of the origin of the evil, as in the process of analyzing the problem he also forms the bases of the Christian doctrine: he argues next to the necessity of God's prevision, incorruptibility and grace, he clarifies the preconditions of the road to God and as a result he also creates the bases of the Christian ethics.

First of all, let's discover what kind of antecedents may have urged the theologian to search for the reason of evil. There are answers in the ancient philosophy traditions to the justification of evil as well, I personally believe that the stoic philosophy of Hellenism was the one that approached the problem with enough circumspection. As far as I am concerned, the stoic philosophy has doctrines that are compatible with the Christian metaphysics, one of them is connected to the free choice. Saint Augustine knew the ancient philosophy – including the stoic concepts – well and when he introduced the notion of free will, he also used his stoic philosophical education.

The Stoics realized that the good or evil nature of our moral acts is the result of our own decision, as the completion of acts is anticipated by the phase of choice. According to the stoic ethics we can choose from three things: the good, the evil and the indifferent ones.[1]

[1] SVF I 190 Stobaios, *Eclogae* p. 57, 18 W. Zenon believed that among the existing everything that receives substance is good, bad or indifferent. The good ones are the •

If the soul does not choose the right one, it will suffer; Stoics consider this as moral evil, however, when it chooses the right one, its reward will be virtue; it is called moral good.[2] Morally, acts coming from choosing indifferent things are considered to be indifferent that is neither good, nor evil. The good or evil choice of the soul is based on the disposition of the sense; moral good materializes if the way of sense is undisturbed and moral evil materializes if the strength of sense is week.[3] The core element of the doctrine is that the freedom of choice is in the hand of the actor, however, the recognition of freedom on the part of Stoics is surprising as they simultaneously believed in the necessity of events. According to their philosophy, every event in the cosmos, whether good or evil, proceed according to a predetermined story, progressing to a perfect state. Evil acts are also the happenings of the cosmos, which are certainly considered evil in our individual lives but for the history and final aim of the cosmos they are considered to be good. Therefore, stoic people understood evil as necessary evil which contributes to the uttermost beautiful state of the cosmos. With a similar reasoning Saint Augustine also confirms the necessity of the existence of the evil as we will see it later, however, now let us go back to the non-Christian answers given to the origin of the evil.

Simultaneously with the activity of Saint Augustine some so called laic philosophical movements also tried to provide answers to the origin of the evil. Here we have to mention the Pelagius Christian movement and the circle of the pagan Manicheans. The latter one's ideas are primarily criticized by Saint Augustine in *Confessiones*, and against the Pelagius he argues in his work entitled *De libero arbitrio.*

The Pelagius acknowledged the freedom of the free will, however, they denied the original sin and did not fully argue next to the importance of God's grace, they left greater role for the free will with regards to achieving salvation.

Manicheanism was very popular in the late antiquity, and it is also well-known that for a short period of time – before his conversion – Saint Augustine was also member of the Manichaean sect.[4] The Manicheans originate their theory from

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• following: common sense, shrewdness, rightfulness, humanity and every virtue or part of virtue. Evil things are the followings: shortsightedness, indiscipline, injustice, cowardice and everything that is evil or part of evil. Indifferent things are the followings: life and death, opinion and indifference, fatigue and joy, richness and poorness, health and illness and similar things.

[2] According to the stoics) the soul is our rational part, ratio drives humans, if ratio is not hindered by anything in choosing the desire correctly, then acts which have been taken are considered to be virtues. However, if due to disturbing events the ratio does not work correctly, then the soul makes mistakes regarding the object of its desire it is like people lost their mind and carry out such acts which realize moral evil. See the understanding of the stoic ethics: Szoboszlai-Kiss, 2010, 15–24.

[3] Consequently, the cleverer we are, the more unable we will be to commit sins. The reasoning of the Stoics seems to be false. Simultaneously with studying we should live a more virtuous life as well, however, real life is not like that.

[4] Manichaeism is connected to Mani, living in the 3rd century, who left behind a mystic doctrine of Buddhist, Christian, Persian and Hindu origins.

the presumption that basically there are two main principles: the good and the evil. The good represents God, the evil represents the evil; good is identified with light, evil is identified with darkness. According to them, the genesis of the world is the result of the fight of these two principles. Darkness came upon light, ripped out some of its parts, mixed them together with the material and physical reality was born. According to this doctrine, humans are mixed beings with good and evil principles working them as well and as light seeds of the good principle are closed in the human body[5] humans always have a lean towards God and long to be saved from the empire of darkness. As Manichaean people believe, the origin of the evil comes from the same God, however, it is an independent principle. Of course, the Christian Saint Augustine could not accept that theory.

Saint Augustine criticizes the Manichean doctrine in Confessiones many times; he is especially dissatisfied with their answer to the origin of the evil. *"And so I pursued the search with a quiet mind, now in a confident feeling that what had been said by the Manicheans–and I shrank from them with my whole heart– could not be true. I now realized that when they asked what was the origin of evil their answer was dictated by a wicked pride, which would rather affirm that thy nature is capable of suffering evil than that their own nature is capable of doing it."*[6] The latter two sentence of the citation has key importance if we want to understand the problem. The Manichean point of view is morally indefensible as they originate the evil in the world from a separate principle, hence exempting individuals' responsibility from the committed sins. Saint Augustine did not find this heretical approach right, according to him, neither a separate entity, nor God can be blamed for the evil, only humans can be made responsible. The reason of the evil is the incorrect usage of the free will that is, when we do not follow God's will. The degree of our freedom is so high that it is hard to live together with it, we make mistakes of our free will many times. The punishment of God is also some kind of evil, however, that is a just punishment for evil acts. According to Saint Augustine, there are two types of bad: Duobus enim modis appellare malum solemus: uno, cum male quemque fecisse dicimus, alio, cum mali aliquid esse perpessum.[7] He differentiates between committing deliberate sins (*actio mali*) and the evil suffered justly (*passio mali*). Due to the idea of justly suffered evil Augustine can be easily blamed that he should believe God to be the one who created the evil, as imposing and carrying out punishments is the will and the act of God. Augustine expected this objection and solved it as well. God is incorruptible, the greatest goodness and good can only create good. Therefore, God cannot be the reason of the evil which is created and suffered by humans: „*At si deum bonum esse nosti uel credis – neque enim aliter fas est –, male non facit. Rursus,*

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[5] The soul returning to God can also be found in the philosophy of Plotinus. Due to its lengths, in this study I do not deal with the comparison of Saint Augustine's and Plotinus's doctrine.
[6] *Confessiones*, VII/III.
[7] *De libero arbitrio*, I. 1.

si deum iustum fatemur – nam et hoc negare sacrilegum est –, ut bonis praemia, ita supplicia malis tribuit; quae utique supplicia patientibus mala sunt." [8] Legitimate punishment is sure a bad experience but it is still God's mercy as everything else he created. Necessarily, God cannot be the creator of any evil.

In the *Confessiones* he does not go into details that the evil is the result of our abuse of free will, he only puts up the agonizing question and provides an answer immediately: *"God is good, yea, most mightily and incomparably better than all his works. But yet he who is good has created them good; behold how he encircles and fills them. Where, then, is evil, and whence does it come and how has it crept in? What is its root and what its seed? Has it no being at all? Why, then, do we fear and shun what has no being? Or if we fear it needlessly, then surely that fear is evil by which the heart is unnecessarily stabbed and tortured–and indeed a greater evil since we have nothing real to fear, and yet do fear. Therefore, either that is evil which we fear, or the act of fearing is in itself evil. But, then, whence does it come, since God who is good has made all these things good? Indeed, he is the greatest and chiefest Good, and hath created these lesser goods; but both Creator and created are all good. Whence, then, is evil?"*[9] His answer is short: the origin of the evil is the privation of good: *"In my ignorance I was much disturbed over these things and, though I was retreating from the truth, I appeared to myself to be going toward it, because I did not yet know that evil was nothing but a privation of good (that, indeed, it has no being)."*[10] Augustine's privation theory is logically unquestionable as well; its main benefit is that evil defined this way also fits the perfect art created by God.[11]

How does the evil realize in a world completely consisting of good? There are not any evil creatures, only the variety of good exists; Augustine presumes a kind of hierarchy of the good: there are good, better and less well things but there are not any evil things; what we believe to be evil is only a weaker intensity of good. The reason that we can still experience negative things can be explained with choosing the deficient good. Every creature, every happening, even punishments and sufferings, just like every act are the variations of good. Our actions are preceded by a choice, in the moment of decision we consider the possible choices. An important provision from the above mentioned is that we can only choose from different sizes of good, when we choose the smaller one, we commit the evil, the sin.[12]

Our choice realizes according to the free will, so the origin of the evil cannot be anything else but the incorrect movement of free will, the desire of the soul

[8] Ibid.
[9] *Confessiones*, VII/V.
[10] *Confessiones*, III/VII.
[11] Stead, 2002, 251.
[12] The stoics explain this with the weak operation of the sense, however, Augustine does not link the bad choice to a cognitive element. I believe he is right in this as from the Stoic theory we would incorrectly expect that the cleverer someone is, the more moral he is.

towards a less useful thing: *Conuenit cnim inter nos omnia malefacta non ob aliud mala esse nisi quod libidine, id est improbanda cupiditate, fiunt.* [13] We are responsible for incorrect choices as we chose them freely, God cannot be blamed for them.[14] When from the emerging good our desire brings us towards the best, we do not realize sin but virtue, again based on our free will. That is why God gave freedom to humans so that they can choose God, the greatest good based on their free will. Therefore, the cause of the evil is that we use our free will in a wrong way, we long towards things with less good, so we lost the ability to only realize good with the free will that is to only act in a virtuous manner. If we used the free will for what it was given to us, we would not be able to choose what is less right, we would not bring evil to the world.

After understanding the reason of the evil, other obstacles emerge. Is our will really free if God predetermined everything in the moment of creation and also planned the misuse of the free will?[15] Augustine answers the question with the predetermination of God.[16] God already knows all of our choices, as he is the maker of all the events in the world; he even knows when we choose virtue among the variations of good and when we make false decisions. God sees what we have done and foresees what we are about to do, however, we ourselves do not know anything about the latter one. The fact that we do not know it beforehand is also our freedom. Living our lives in discovery is much more exciting; would it make any sense if we woke up every morning knowing what that exact day would bring to us. God frees us from that burden, our freedom stands in that the future and together with it all of our future choices is a secret for us. Augustine plainly explains to us that not knowing the future is the greatest gift. For the first time such a gift seems a little astonishing, as in our modern world, but especially at Augustine's time people were very much interested in their own fate's, future's story. With the gift of God, that is not knowing out future, we commit sins, however, our freedom also has a much more valuable benefit. Most of all, we got freedom to choose the good that is God. Free will is a gift, God did not give it to us to create evil in the world with our wrong choices but to search for him, as we are imperfect, we cannot make the best out of the given gift.

God gave us the gift of the freedom of choice to choose him based on our free will, as God cannot be chosen from necessity, restraint and the tool of getting closer to him also proves that. Love cannot be forced, so our love for God cannot be forced either, it can only come from our free will. He gave us a complicated gift, as due to him we are guilty and still, with this exact gift we can choose the love of God by ourselves. And this poses another problem. If God ordered this freedom

[13] *De libero arbitrio*, I. 4.
[14] *De libero arbitrio,* III. 10.
[15] *De libero arbitrio*, III. 20.
[16] Saint Augustine explains the necessity with God's goodness and sovereignty, the Stoics did the same with recognizing the cosmos's final beauty.

for us, how can it be that we do not instantly desire for his love, why do we misuse our free will. Augustine explains it with the original sin, due to which we lost the ability to only create good with our freedom. Augustine can also answer the necessity of God's grace with his answer: due to the original sin we need God's grace as well, in order to get to him.[17] Without the forgiving grace with cannot find him, we must believe in God.[18]

Augustine later modified the definition of *liberum arbitrium*, the free will choosing between the different types of good and rather introduced the notion of *libertas*, which is explained in his writing entitled *Contra duas epistulas pelagianorum* written in 420. At first reading, appallingly, he identifies freedom with the inability to commit sins.[19] From the previous definition of free will it turned out that sin is the result of incorrect choices, therefore, *libertas* means the inability to commit sins, the absurdity of incorrect choices when every choice is right and creates the greatest good. Hence, people realize the greatest good from the different types of intensity without deliberation and hesitation. They do not even need to choose as they are driven by their faith in God, they love and trust God in that anything that happens is good and fulfills the will of God. *Libertas* is hence the release from the burden of choice. Real Christian people are just like that, accept God's will perfectly, undertake everything without problems because they love God. Having such knowledge also justifies to be chosen from God, therefore, loving God is the key to a calm life.

At the end of my study I am going to cite Saint Augustine's word on his love towards God:

„But what is it that I love in loving thee? Not physical beauty, nor the splendor of time, nor the radiance of the light–so pleasant to our eyes–nor the sweet melodies of the various kinds of songs, nor the fragrant smell of flowers and ointments and spices; not manna and honey, not the limbs embraced in physical love–it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet it is true that I love a certain kind of light and sound and fragrance and food and embrace in loving my God, who is the light and sound and fragrance and food and embracement of my inner man– where that light shines into my soul which no place can contain, where time does not snatch away the lovely sound, where no breeze disperses the sweet fragrance, where no eating diminishes the food there provided, and where there is an embrace that no satiety comes to sunder. This is what I love when I love my God."[20]

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[17] He corrected the reasoning of Pelagius with his argument. Pelagius denies the original sin and the necessity of God's mercy.
[18] *Confessiones,* X./XXIX.
[19] *Contra duas epistulas pelagianorum*, 1 5. In: Stead, 1994.
[20] *Confessiones*, X./VI.

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