On the Free Choice of the Will in Faith or Reason: A Study of Augustine of Hippo

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Abstract
This article is the study of the phenomenon of will in Augustine of Hippo's systematic ontology. According to On the Free Choice of the Will, Augustine considers that the origin of sin in human beings must not be given by God because he is Omni- benevolence. In that case, God has not created any badness in the world but has arranged the layers of good for all kinds of beings. To distinguish human beings from the other creatures, God has gifted the abilities of reason and the free will for their souls. The later one, Augustine argues, makes human beings have the choice of being good or fall. While his argument is based on the system of theology, of which it raises the function of faith and declines the capacity of reason, his explanation of the free choice of the will would be doubted as a preacher's persuasion. To clarify the doubt, here I will discuss the function of the free choice of the will in the status of human beings' souls through his systematic ontology.

Keywords: Phenomenology of Will, Augustine of Hippo, On the Free Choice of the Will, Theology, Ontology

1. Introduction

St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) can be said to be the cornerstone of theology and the patristic philosophy. As an ancestor of the patristic philosophy, he established a complete theological system through combing Neoplatonism's thought, especially Plotinus (A.D. 204-270). Plotinus built his thought on two famous Greek philosophers －Plato (B.C. 427-347) and Aristotle (B.C. 384-322), in which he created a vivid pre-trinity metaphysical system: the One, the Intelligence, and the soul. According to his saying, three of them are both the original matter and the creator of the world. With the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire, Augustine not only succeeded the idea of Plotinus but also transferred it with his Christian belief. In his autobiography *Confession*, he described his early skeptical life and the process of becoming a faithful Christian. In this work, it shows Augustine's theological philosophy, which is God is Omni-benevolence and has arranged just way for all beings, especially human being. Following this theodicy, he later developed the concept of free will in *On the Free Choice of the Will*. In this book, he considered that free will is a gift given by God, and through using it people can turn a good way toward God. While he constituted repeating this saying "unless you believe or you will not understand" (Isaiah 7: 9) in this book, it made his explanation to the free will was seen as a preacher's persuasion. Therefore, there would be a question in Augustine's philosophy, in which he over emphasized the function of faith and declined the capacity of reason. How then did he combine the pure reason and the absolute faith into one philosophical system? Would he not be influenced by his religious faith and so modify his critical thinking?

To understand St. Augustine's thought, I will first discuss the human condition and the meaning of free will under his work *On the Free Choice of the Will*. By taking his own experience in *Confession*, I would then try to find out what sort of role faith plays in his philosophy. Also, through measuring his both works, it can perceive how Augustine dealt with the relationship between faith and reason in human being's capacity.

2. The Human Condition under St. Augustine's Ontology

In order to respond the question that "If God is omnibenevolence, where would the evil come from", St. Augustine provided a theological panorama to point out human being's condition in *On the Free Choice of the Will*. In that work, He asserted that God has created all beings in accord with their qualities of good and confirmed that the idea of good is the same as the idea of life. In other words, he thought all beings are born to practice their goods, or they would merely be said alive. According to that, he categorized human beings, who are able to use their rationality and free will to judge and choose good things, as the status of "great good"[1]. Considering animals' ability about sensation and activity as the status of "intermediate good". As to stone or plant, they are in the most basic living situation and so they are valued as the status of "small good[2]". With the divine hierarchy, all beings would live in harmony with their own capabilities. Additionally, Augustine pointed out that the

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[1] Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 2.19.50.191.

[2] *Ibid.,* 2.4.10.35-41.

abstract things are the closest one to God. For instance, "numbers and wisdom[3]," mentioned in the Bible, were not decay or disappear even someone tries to destroy them and so they are immortal. Moreover, it must include some kind of numbers inside every creatures, or people cannot count them by their rationality. Numbers here can refer to the mathematics or science, invented by human beings, and also stand for God's harmonic order in the world. Animals and the other creatures cannot use their sensation to grasp numbers, yet human beings cancalculate them with their reason. Because of it, human beings are able to think and judge everything in accord with divine order. Meanwhile, when the freedom of will tends to approach any objects, it already collected all information about good. That is the way how human beings' consciousness operates their own will. Because of the two abilities, human beings are called the highest one within all creatures. Though God has contributed the same ability to mankind, each of them were different individuals in their own. That is to say, when a person senses an object, his internal consciousness will transfer his intention of the object to his sensation and submits the information to his understanding. Even though different people seek things with the same abilities, they will receive different consequences because of their own will. As I have mentioned before, number is one of the great good things, but human beings' will may follow the wrong path to chase the numbers instead of the higher things such as wisdom. The freedom of will may lead mankind to long for beauty or wealth. While, to Augustine, both wealth and beauty themselves are not evil because wealth is necessary for living and beauty is the appearance in a harmonic proportion. They both are the numbers' representation and so are the objects of reason. And reason belongs to good, therefore, beauty and wealth are good as well.[4]

However, people who seek for wisdom are better than those who chase numbers. For the latter one, Augustine thought, would just stop at the illusion and occupy the discovery as their own property and won't go further for its cause[5]. On the contrary, the fore one will ignore the selfish passion and keep going to find out the divine cause. For human beings are supposed to know and decide what things are worthier, and so they are able to achieve the higher goal, so to speak, the wisdom. In fact, to Augustine, only the knowledge of God can be called wisdom and that is what he thought the correct human condition is[6]. Therefore, if people feel painful or lost, it means they are not at the correct position. These feelings, in Augustin's explanation, would be a warning for them to back to the right way.

It is the freedom of will can lead people go astray or correctly, but it has been designed by God and how can it go astray. Therefore, it must have two kinds of will within human beings and both of them are eager for living. For that reason, they two would fight against each other because one seek the carnal life and another seek the spiritual life. The spiritual life means approaching truth, or, in Augustine' view, the way toward God. This kind of thought can connect to the faith, in this way, the good will is actually the will of faith in God.

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[3] *Ibid.,* 2.8.24.
[4] *Ibid.* 2.9.27.106
[5] *Ibid.* 2.9.27.107.
[6] *Ibid.* 2.11.32.

Augustine had mentioned the process of the competition between the two wills in *Confession*. That was the time when he heard of his respected friend's baptism, who was once a skepticism like him, it made Augustine begin to look forward to the faith in Christian. He was pondering over the good will's intention in the process of faith. He said: I sighted after such freedom, but was bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice…the consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity…the new will, which was beginning to be within me a will to serve you freely and to enjoy you, God …so my two wills, one old, the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, were in conflict with one another, and their discord robbed my soul of all concentration. (Augustine, 1991:140)

He recalled his life experience in pursuing the truth since 12 years ago and he concluded the excuse he did not convert into Christianity: 'the truth is uncertain, you do not want to abandon the burden of futility'[7]. At the same time, he also realized that his body is followed the will of the soul, yet the soul is unwilling to obey the good will. The reason is that the will in the soul has been bound by the accumulation of his past habitual life, so to speak, the carnal will, since he was an infant. Once his soul wanted to escape from these carnal habits, they would convince his with his own life experience: "Do you think you can live without these."[8] After end of the quarrel, he then heard the children chorus singing "take up and read", and he suddenly realized the sign, took a bible nearby, and saw "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy."(Romans 13:13) From that sign, Augustine thought he can be rescued by the will of faith in God and then he accepted baptism.

In this way, the freedom of will follows its duty to seek for the knowledge of God; also, according to Augustine's theology, the consequence of his baptism can be seen as a realization of human condition. Therefore, it can be concluded that the freedom of will, in each individual's soul, is the key point to determine what way is worthier. Therefore, if people's reason and the freedom of will operate healthily, they will pursue the right way without any hesitation.

3.   The Methodology of Faith

According to aforementioned, St. Augustine adopted the faith in God as a solution to respond the origin of evil. If taking this idea, the saying "unless you believe or you will not understand" (Isaiah 7: 9) would be his analytic methodology. This is to say, he tried to emphasize that the superiority of faith is the prerequisite of understanding, but both of them were essential. Therefore, to find out what content Augustine first needed to believe, or, what idea his will first intended to achieve would be the first step to understand his methodology.

At the beginning of *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine already took this saying as his precondition, he said:

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[7] Augustine, *Confession*, VIII. vii. (18).
[8] Ibid. VIII. xi (24-27).

… if you know or believe that God is good (it is blasphemous to think otherwise), then He does not do evil. On the other hand, if we grant God is just (denying it is irreligious), then He rewards the good; by the same token, He hands out punishments to evildoers…which we must believe since we believe that the world is governed by divine providence－then God is indeed the author of (b) suffered from something evil, though not in any way the author of (a) done evil…(Augustine, 2010: 3) St. Augustine believed he lived a world that is under God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence, so he also didn't believe God is the creator of "evil". Subsequently, he denied people can do evil things from learning. For understanding is the result of learning, and so to learning means to be good and not to be evil. [9] When it comes to the order about believing and understanding, Augustine thought he would not understand everything unless God has helped him to embark on the path of faith.[10] In other words, he took the God as an authority to prove his understanding correct.

If we compare Augustine with Greek philosophers and Manicheanism, we would find that the latter ones only used their own rationality as the assumption of understanding, while Augustine took the faith in God as his assumption. To him, those philosophers were not rational for real because they were blind at denying God's existence, and Augustine would say that though that "is stupid.[11]" However, this methodology would make him at the risk of answering paradoxically in some question. That is, he could not doubt the prerequisite of faith in God. As long as someone asked him about the knowledge beyond his prerequisite, he would not be able to answer it. For instance, his response about the falling of the free will is a typical one: If I were to reply to your question that I do not know, perhaps you will then be the sadder, but I will at least have replied truthfully. What is nothing cannot be known. Hold firm with resolute religiousness that you will not encounter, by sensing or understanding or whatever kind of thinking, any good thing which is not from God…we admit that this movement is sin, since it is a defective movement, and every defect is from nothing. Be assured that this movement does not pertain to God! (Augustine, 2010: 71)

So for Augustine, he could not understand what he didn't believe, so to speak, the thing he didn't believe is so called non-bring. Therefore, he would dismiss "non-being" from his knowledge, and in this sense, he would not take the concept of "non-being" into his ontology. That is, he included ethic and epistemological among the idea of faith. According to ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides, "without Being … you will not find thinking" (8, 35-36), and Socrates, "virtue is knowledge", Augustine transferred the traditional thoughts into his theological background. He integrated virtue and knowledge into the category of faith in God, therefore, the precondition of his ontology would be "faith is equal to virtue and knowledge."

From the prerequisite, St. Augustine, in fact, already identified that the origin of evil would be faithless. When people don't believe in God, they don't want to understand what good is, then they will gradually become ignorance, which is the possibility of doing "evil." Although Augustine did not clearly point out that

[9] *Augustine, On the Free Choice of the Will, I.I.3.9.*

[10] *Ibid.* 1.2.4.II

[11] *Ibid.* 2.18.17.180.

"faithless" is the origin of evil in his work, from the above situation, he would rather to say it as death.

4.   Conclusion

St. Augustine takes "unless you believe or you will not understand" as his methodology to discuss the question about the origin of evil, which is based on his faith in Christianity. In this sense, he thought that the situation of human beings, as the highest creatures in the world, already justly arranged by God. They should use their freedom of will correctly, or they will suffer from their lost.

Combing his own experience in *Confessions*, the meaning of conversion to God is equivalent to going back the position of human being. If we need to conclude a reason of the evil in theology, which could be the free will turn away from God. Thus, though Augustine emphasized the importance about belief and understanding, he actually transferred the traditional philosophical thoughts into his theological background, which would be "faith is equal to virtue and knowledge."

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