

HIERARCHY AND VIRTUES IN PATRISTIC THOUGHT

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Abstract

A discussion of virtues and virtuous life in the writings of the Church Fathers is a very complex enterprise. This article presents several important orientations in patristic thought concerning the perspective on human freedom of action and the role of virtues in man's life. They are actually as many paths of research since the writers, namely St Basil of Cappadocia, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Augustine and St Maximus the Confessor, initiated a line of cultural investigation on the topic that is as relevant today as it was in their lifetime. Although the authors are presented in chronological order, important ideas are taken up and sometimes placed in a new perspective, which shows on the one hand the originality of the writers and the contexts that prompted their arguments and on the other hand, the consistency and the harmony of patristic thinking in general.

Keywords: good, free will, virtue, synthesis of virtues

Introduction

I believe any attempt to visit the topic of virtues in patristic thought has to resort to an introductory discussion of the nature of the good. I will first discuss this in the perspective of the Cappadocian Fathers, St Basil the Great and St Gregory of Nyssa (the fourth century A.D.), his brother. It is important to note that both wrote on this matter mainly in reply to the various heresies and distortions of the Christian dogma current in the fourth century and before (and taken up later in various forms) and following the first Council at Nicaea, held in 325.

On the nature of Good and Evil

In one of his homilies devoted to defending the principle that God is not the author of misfortunes (St Basil the Great, 2004: 159), St Basil relates the existence of evil in the world to the free will of created beings (be they human or spiritual). Evil does not have an existence in itself, it is not created, but it is not uncreated either.

It is not possible to have been created because all creation is good since it originates in God, the Creator and the Good beyond reason or power of comprehension. It is not uncreated, since it is not possible to conceive it as having the same nature and value as good itself. If this were true, good and evil would both be without beginning, endless and prior to the creation of the world (one of the basic tenets of Manichaeism). St Basil goes on to say that since all things have their origin in God, it is inconceivable that evil should derive out of good. In the same vein, the ugly does not have its origin in the beautiful, nor does sin originate in virtue. One principle cannot beget its very opposite.

However, there is evil in the world and the human soul sometimes shows a destructive preference for it. A question which has been very often asked and has never been ignored by the Fathers is why the soul receives evil and even becomes controlled by it. Most answers relate the deliberate choice of evil to the free will of all created beings. All of them enjoy this miraculous gift, the culminating feature of beings endowed with reason. In St Basil's words „...free from any constraint and created by the Creator with free will – as it was made in the image of God – the soul conceives the good ...and has the capacity to preserve its natural state; but it has also the capacity of distancing itself from good...”(ibid. 59). The choices we make depend on us and what depends on us is precisely our free will. Virtues are carried out by our free will, and not by constraint. Those who reproach God that He has not made us infallible in nature show a distinct preference for irrationality in place of the rational nature, and for the static nature, devoid of any initiative, at the expense of the free and active nature. As it can be seen here St Basil connects the choice of virtue with a free mind, and a rational and active nature. Virtue is therefore the result of our good choice.

St Basil is a tireless writer on the human responsibility towards the fate of the earth, the human race in general and the immediate neighbours or fellow beings in particular. All human action, he lets us understand, has long-term consequences on our lives. The cause of evil (be it in the form of poverty, hunger, disease, drought, confusion of seasons) lies in man's behaviour: “...the multitude of our sins has unhinged seasons, pushing them out of their natural boundaries and has changed our times into something really unusual (ibid. 129).” As man has decided to live his life in ignorance of God's gifts the whole world becomes perverted and natural order is abolished. Present misfortunes are therefore primarily a consequence of our sins.

In a similar type of comment (*On Soul and Resurrection*), St Gregory of Nyssa clearly says that evil is embodied in vice, but vice does not have an existence in itself, being the absence of good. If it is called evil it is done so because good is absent. On the other hand, what does not exist is not real, and "what is not real cannot be the work of Him Who created reality" (St. Gregory of Nyssa, 2003: 126). The argument of the non-existence of evil is taken up here with an additional

emphasis on the fact that the difference between virtue and sin should not be understood as an opposition between two real things; rather, as we oppose existence to non-existence, we can say that evil is opposed to the idea of virtue without being something in itself; it is a result of the absence of good.

St Gregory reminds the reader that out of His love for people God has given them the freedom to choose between what is right and what is wrong, both in this transitory life and in the perspective of eternal life, which has endlessness as its boundary. It is often difficult to discern between good and evil, but the choice one makes is radical, since choosing good ensures access to the future life, and therefore a good life has the duration of eternity. We can notice here that St Gregory projects the choices we make (good or bad) against an eschatological perspective and from this point of view he says that „...this is, in my view, the chasm brought about not by a cleavage of the earth, but by man choosing the opposite direction” (ibid. 53). It is possible for man to do this because the very nature of man, which is a created nature, is subject to change; it was brought into being out of nothing, therefore it reflects change and transformation.

Freedom and free will

This is why free will has such an important part to play in the choices we make. In St Gregory’s view, freedom and free will make man similar to the divine nature. When he defines freedom, he reminds the reader of its likeness to the independent and self-standing status that was bequeathed on man in the very beginning, but was later obscured by sin. Freedom is single-natured and is related only to itself, therefore anything which is free associates with that which bears its likeness. Virtue, for instance, is without constraint, in it everything is free.

Freedom is also the glorious feature of rational and intellectual nature. If this nature were to lose freedom, it would lose the gift of intelligence as well. "What use will there be in the capacity to think when the freedom to choose lies in someone else’s power?" (ibid.173). Furthermore, if there is no free will, virtue has disappeared as well, since it is activated by man’s free choice; and when virtue has gone, life has lost its value and the capacity to think becomes perverted: anything is possible, anything can be justified. The idea of everything becoming relative, devoid of any criteria for judging whether things are right or wrong, seems to me particularly modern and viable. Virtue, it seems, is the foundation of a righteous life.

So far, I have tried to establish the main lines of thought and argument with reference to good and evil according to the two Cappadocian Fathers and the relationship between free will and good choices. One important conclusion is that good and evil are in no way related by origin or nature; they are not similar since evil consists of the absence of good and does not have any consistence in itself.

Another conclusion is that virtue cannot be conceived in the absence of freedom and cannot be forced on man; virtue has to benefit from man's free and unlimited consent to come as closely as possible to the divine life (the source of all virtue) whose image the human being is. Moreover, since human nature attempts, through a lifelong effort, to approach the likeness to God which has been implanted in it since the creation, it means that the progress is without cessation because virtue is endless as God Himself is infinite in His goodness. In one of his major books, *The Life of Moses*, St Gregory says that we can only follow in God's footsteps but the road on which we engage is without end.

Next, I would like to go into more details concerning the nature of freedom and free will and I shall do so by resorting to St Augustine's philosophical framework on the topic.

St Augustine and the value of free will

St Augustine's book *De Libero Arbitrio* (On Free Will) has a special chapter on the hierarchy of goods (good things). This comes up in a dialogue at the end of the Second Book (actually, the whole book is written in dialogue form) aiming to find out whether free will should be included among good things and whether it is given by God. The demonstration starts with an analogy: free will appears as a necessity, as is the case with justice that nobody can use in a wrong way. Free will is a necessary ingredient to a life of rectitude - „...liberam voluntatem, sine qua nemo potest recte vivere...” (St Augustine, 2004: 225) - , therefore it represents a good, and, as such, it is given to us by divinity. Along the same lines as the Cappadocian Fathers but in a more technical language reminding of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, we are told that all goods (whether big, medium or small) come from God. Virtues, for instance, due to which one can lead a correct life, are in the category of big goods („Virtutes...magna bona sunt...” , ibid. 229), since nobody can use them inadequately or in a bad way.

St Augustine seems to say that everything has to be judged according to life's final purpose, that of living a correct life. From this point of view, virtues cannot be used badly because their field of action consists in the right use of goods.

On the other hand, free will has been demonstrated to be used both adequately and wrongly, therefore it belongs to the category of medium goods. When free will unites with the Eternal Good the human being reaches a happy life, and this life of happiness represents man's primordial good. But the will that drifts away from the immutable common good, heading towards its own good, reaches a sinful state. With this argument we come to another definition of evil which is seen as a diversion from the immutable good and a return to the changing, transitory goods.

Both the diversion and the return are not imposed on man but are voluntary acts; therefore the punishment and the unhappiness following them are just.

A few things are worth mentioning here as conclusions. First, there is a hierarchy of all goods depending on their contribution to a just and happy life and their own nature which renders them as big, medium and small. Second, free will being a good thing comes from God, as do all good things. Being liable to be used in both directions, towards the immutable good and away from that, free will is a medium good. Finally, evil is the result of free will choosing to depart from the eternal good in a voluntary act that is not without radical consequences.

The good will and the cardinal virtues

As the Stoic philosophers before him, St Augustine holds repeatedly that a happy, correct and sage life is what we should be aiming for. What propels us towards this primary aim is our good will that is implanted in our souls and that cannot compare with any of the other goods, let alone material goods. (The concept of *bona voluntas* - the good will - was introduced by Seneca in the Stoic thinking and the way St Augustine uses it in his demonstration owes much to Stoicism in general.) Anyone deprived of it, anyone who does not wish for it arduously will be counted among the unhappy people. What is interesting here is that in order to have a good will it is enough to wish to have it. The definition he provides in the First Book (ibid.105) builds a bridge between what stands in man's power and the virtues that guide the happy and moral men in their lives: "It is the will according to which we wish to live correctly and honestly and reach the highest wisdom."

It is important to note here that St Augustine takes things much further than the academic Stoics for whom the good intention was enough. On the contrary, he says, in order to be virtuous, and therefore happy, having a good will is not sufficient; a man has to love and amplify such a good will, the emphasis here being on love.

Having said that St Augustine spells out the cardinal virtues that lead us to a happy life - wisdom, temperance, courage and justice - , I shall very briefly approach each of them not without first mentioning that research has given as almost certain Cicero's work *De inventione* as the initial source of their definitions, and in one case (courage) the work of Epictetus.

Wisdom is the knowledge of things, of those that we have to desire and of those that we need to avoid. *Temperance* is the disposition of the soul that controls and represses the drives towards shameful things. These cravings (or even lust) are the worst enemies of good will. Moving on, *justice* is considered the virtue through which everyone gets what is his. The just man is unable to do anyone harm,

whereas injustice is done when nobody is attributed what belongs to them. Finally, *courage* (moral strength) is the resistance to bad will that is attracted to things beyond our control. The strong man accepts, with a peaceful mind, to be deprived of those things that lie beyond our power to obtain or keep. These four virtues complete the profile of the man who places a lot of weight on his good will and cherishes it. It follows that the man who takes pleasure in his own good will and despises anything else which is considered to be good (but is ephemeral in reality) is a happy man; a happy man therefore values true, stable goods.

In this section I have taken the discussion on free will and virtues a step further towards a systematic approach of a virtuous life. We have come to the philosophic question of what means to be happy which St Augustine approaches, heavily influenced by the Stoics, but with a different final outcome in the end: to get near the eternal, immutable truth.

The last station on this short itinerary will be the contribution on this topic of another Father of the Church who lived in the seventh century.

St Maximus the Confessor's view on free will

St Maximus the Confessor died in 662 as a martyr, after being exiled and tortured in the time of the monothelite heresy, very powerful in Constantinople during his lifetime. His thought on man's evolution towards an improved life, on human will and virtues is extremely profound and complex and has become a turning point in Christian East-European thought.

I shall very briefly introduce the main concepts of his work that enable a better understanding of his perspective on free will and a virtuous life. I ended the first section of this paper (On the nature of Good and Evil) with St Gregory's remark on man's potential for change and transformation due to his creation out of nothing. St Maximus (who devoted his work *Ambigua* to clarify difficult passages in the writings of other Church Fathers) introduces and defines very carefully the concept of **movement** which seems to me to be related to the change St Gregory talks about. Only divinity is unmoved, but everything that has been brought into existence out of nothing is moving, being borne to a target. The characteristic of all created things is "...to move towards the end without beginning" (St Maximus, 2006: 105), if they wish to reach a happy existence. This end or final purpose is God Who is also the cause of all creation. The direction of this movement is made possible by the choice of their will (*kata gnomen*).

A first definition of freedom as *our wish to be our own masters* (cf. St Maximus), a fact which allows death to enter our substance, is corrected by the argument that movement towards the final Good does not suppress our freedom, but rather strengthens it, so that it abandons itself freely to God. Once the human will has

united with the will of God there is only one active will; the human will, in complete abandonment of itself is no longer deterred from its original course, but conforms to the purpose for which it has been created: to reach the eternal, happy life. Thus, the human will, at this stage, is unable to desire something else and is engaged totally on the way to become one with divinity. As the Cappadocian Fathers before him, St Maximus holds that this movement is natural in man and has been implanted in him at creation. The human nature has been given a tendency, a drive to seek the good, as well as an attraction for divine life that enables it to embark on the road that leads from **image** (God's image in man) to the **likeness** to God.

These other two basic concepts, image and likeness, are united by virtue. It is as if virtue, assumed in complete freedom, opens up the road to divinity for man.

There is always, of course, the other road which is contrary to man's nature; very often man neglects his origin and lets himself carried away carelessly towards nothingness, contradicting the very purpose for which he was created. In the process, both soul and body are in suffering from this deviation which man chose willingly. In St Maximus's words "...he has willingly chosen what is bad and has no existence/consistence instead of what is good and exists" (ibid. 129). Once again we come across the idea, expressed by the Fathers before St Maximus, that good has substance and evil is non-substantial, only with him there is a change in emphasis: we are told that existence in itself is a good, whereas that person whose life is not grounded in good "tumbles" (ibid.) towards evil, and in the process is deprived of substance and of life itself. The decision rests entirely with the human will. St Maximus uses very unambiguous and radical language to express this when he says that there is nothing that God does without man's consent.

We have now come to a topic of great importance in St Maximus's work. In complete agreement to his whole approach he says that there are three general purposes for which God created the world - he brought us into existence *to be*, *to be in a good way* and *to be eternally in a good way*. The extremes of this tenet, the first and the third, are entirely within God's power, as He is the cause of all things created. Existence and eternal existence (which St Maximus also calls *true* existence, "to ontos einai") are exclusively God's gifts, but good existence depends on our free will and our movement towards eternity. This freedom in the middle acts as a bond between the ends of this continuum; on the one hand it reveals and supports the good implanted in our being in the beginning and on the other hand, it makes possible the eternal good at the final extreme. From this perspective our earthly life receives a hugely positive connotation in St Maximus's view, as it is in a substantial way responsible for receiving the true, eternal good.

In another section of the book that discusses the meaning revealed in the eighth day St Maximus brings up this topic again from a slightly different perspective: existence was given to creatures through *substance/being*, good existence is revealed in their *will* and eternal existence was given to them through God's *grace*. The human will is responsible for the good evolution in man's life and as such, ensures man's access to blessed eternal existence. However, St Maximus carefully points out that God's will works together with man's will so that in the end, this co-operation which is impossible to explain or describe will reach that final stage when all movement will have ceased and all things will have earned their right to restful life. Without the human will and its work the earthly life could not be accomplished and it could not be ready for the creation being united with God. What is the role of virtues in this effort?

The hierarchy of virtues

As I have said before, St Maximus sees virtue as a dynamic force conducive to eternal life. But the road to the final end has several stages and man has to experience all of them. However, before enlarging on this topic, I would like to bring up several other consequences of virtuous life.

First, there is an important spiritual aspect in his doctrine saying that the body is changed through the means of virtue. Contrary to previous philosophic opinions, especially Platonic and Neoplatonic, maintaining that the body, being matter, imprisons the soul and constrains its movements and aspirations, St Maximus holds that the body becomes rational through the exercise of virtue and fit to receive the work of God. This thought is constantly present in St Maximus's work and in the principle he puts forward that the body, which is subject to passion and material temptations, can rise to such a spiritual status that ultimately allowed the Incarnation of the Creator. Through virtues and away from the assault of passions the body becomes thus guided by reason in a way that makes it compatible with the union to the soul.

Second, virtues make the universe transparent to our understanding since a virtuous man is more open to God's gifts, and reason and virtue work together.

Next, virtue is active, dynamic, and opposed to decay and decomposition. Virtue also brings stability to a man's life as it makes him strong when confronted to change or transitoriness. There are many other relevant aspects concerning this topic in St Maximus's doctrine but I shall now move on to the discussion of the most important virtues and their hierarchy.

The spiritual world is made up of four virtues, moral judgment or sagacity, courage, self-restraint and justice, replicating the number of the elements composing the created world: ether, water, air and earth. But the number four has a

different significance as well: it represents the number of the four Books of the New Testament. The scriptures have the remarkable characteristic of uniting the sensible world and the spiritual world of virtues.

Moral judgment reveals the spiritual reasons in the created world, showing the Origin and Cause of everything; it also attracts the soul to divinity. *Courage* supports the spiritual life, *self-restraint* bears the fruit of spiritual life and keeps alive the desire for God, while *justice* equally distributes spirituality to every single being and relates us to good through our will. The four of them contribute to the consistency of the world.

These four cardinal virtues create, through synthesis, two more general ones: *wisdom* and *kindness*. Wisdom is the result of the blend between moral judgment and justice, and constitutes the support for knowledge; the combination of courage and self-restraint results in kindness, which finds its expression in the lack of passion and desire for those things which are contrary to human nature as it was created. St Maximus then proceeds to the final synthesis; the two virtues mentioned above create the most concentrated and general virtue, *love*. As we can see, St Maximus reads the scriptures and the comments and interpretations of the Fathers before him according to a systematic pattern: the soul climbs its way to divine life guided by virtues that are as many steps to an improved and holy life. The combination of these steps gives value to human life and creates a model to be followed by those who use their will in a good way.

In St Maximus's opinion love is a unifying virtue that communicates and communicates itself, and is of divine origin. The soul, we are told, moves and makes its way through the diversity of the cosmos, going through syntheses and unifying all virtues in a single one, love. This love is of a spiritual nature and is related to the knowledge of God. However, we are told, the knowledge of God is not a theoretical one, but it represents a means of becoming one with God. In other words, the role of virtues is not to provide man with some theoretical equipment for approaching God, but to guide him, therapeutically, to the point where knowledge becomes love and love is meant to get the human being closer to the divine life.

I have tried to present the contributions of four important Christian writers on the role of free will and virtues in the process of man's embarking on the journey to the eternal good. As they wrote in different historical contexts, their views have different types of emphasis depending on the idea or issue that they supported. However, all four show a remarkable consistency of views which I believe can be explained, albeit partly, by the similarity of their purpose: to guide their fellow human beings on their path towards discovering themselves and understanding the divine love.

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