The origin of evil in St. Augustine

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1 INTRODUCTION

Research into the origin of evil has been a topic of great interest over the centuries, attracting the attention of a wide range of thinkers in various disciplines. Since ancient times, philosophers, theologians, and scientists have devoted time and effort to exploring this complex question, which transcends the traditional boundaries of fields of study, including both the religious and the philosophical and scientific domains.

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Among the many thinkers who stand out in this context is St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in the fourth century, whose works offer a profound analysis on the nature of evil, the freedom of the human will, and the relationship between evil and original sin (Augustine, 2017). Augustine argues that evil is not a substantial entity in itself, but rather a lack of good, an absence of being. This view underscores the importance of the human will in choosing between good and evil, with original sin being considered as the catalyst for the entry of evil into the human world.

In addition, Augustine discusses the need for divine grace as a means of overcoming evil. He suggests that, after original sin, humanity was subject to physical and moral suffering, but the redemption brought by Christ offers the possibility of restoration and salvation, thus emphasizing the importance of human freedom of choice and divine intervention in the fight against evil (Gilson, 2006).

Exploring evil from a multidisciplinary perspective reveals the relevance not only of religious interpretations, but also of scientific and philosophical advances. Discoveries in fields such as physics, cosmology, biology, and psychology have contributed significantly to a broader understanding of the universe and human nature, opening up new possibilities for investigating the problem of evil (Gilson, 2006).

Therefore, the question of the origin of evil continues to challenge humanity, requiring an integrated approach and a constant search for understanding and resolution. By examining the works of

thinkers such as St. Augustine and considering modern scientific advancements, we can make significant progress in our understanding of this complex phenomenon that is intrinsic to the human condition.

The methodology employed in this research reflects a reflexive approach to exploring St. Augustine's ideas about evil. Initially, the author's original works were analyzed to understand their fundamental perspectives directly from his own words. Additionally, it was crucial to consult secondary sources, such as expert commentaries and scholarly analysis, to gain additional insights and deepen the understanding of Augustinian thought on evil.

In this perspective, the central objective of this study is to understand St. Augustine's conception of the origin of evil. It seeks to investigate how the thinker approaches this complex issue.

2 THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ST. AUGUSTINE

St. Augustine, in his insightful analysis, observes that the human will is a vast field where a myriad of influences converge, from the innermost individual impulses to the complex social pressures that permeate the fabric of society (Augustine, 2000). In this approach, he offers a more comprehensive and penetrating view of the intricate nuances of human nature, highlighting how disconnection with the

divine leaves human beings vulnerable to the insidious seductions of sin and temptations.

It is important to emphasize that Augustine is not content with just pointing out human frailty; It also highlights the individual's inherent ability to make choices and walk the path of virtue and redemption. In addition, the philosopher explores in depth the crucial role that the community plays in the moral formation of the individual (Costa, 2014; Agostinho, 2000). He emphasizes the determining influence of education and example as fundamental elements in the transmission of ethical and spiritual values.

Augustine maintains that living in society plays a crucial role in the formation of the human will, and can influence it in a positive or negative way, depending on the moral standards and the predominant influences in the environment in which one lives (Augustine, 2000). He is not restricted to discussing theological and philosophical questions about evil, but also strives to provide practical guidelines for a virtuous and balanced life.

In his works, Augustine not only encourages individuals to cultivate virtue and resist temptations, but also urges them to ceaselessly seek reconciliation, both with the deity and with their fellow human beings (Augustine, 2000). It recognizes that community life can be both an incentive and an obstacle to moral and spiritual development, and therefore promotes the importance of conscious

choices and the search for a path that promotes peace and harmony among people.

For him, faith plays a key role in resolving philosophical questions, while truth is sought in the Holy Scriptures. He argues that although God is omniscient and knows all our free acts, our free will remains intact and is not manipulated by Him (Augustine, 2007). However, it is relevant to highlight that, from a religious point of view, reason needs to go through a process of purification or maturation in order to understand spiritual realities, given the limitation of human nature or, as he suggests, due to original sin (Costa, 2014).

Thus, by connecting faith and reason, Augustine argues that reason is driven to understand temporal realities as having an eternal meaning, while faith enables a rational interpretation of religious dogmas. Although faith and reason follow different paths, he argues that both converge, since faith is always at the service of reason (Novaes, 2007). However, he emphasizes that faith precedes reason, as it is necessary to believe first in order to understand the contents of faith, although reason plays a vital role in enhancing this understanding.

The interdependence between faith and reason is a central theme in the search for understanding the mysteries of the universe. Rather than being conceived as antagonistic concepts, faith and reason are intertwined in a complex way, transcending the boundaries of time and space. Reason, often portrayed as a compass, offers guidance in the labyrinths of tangible and intangible realities, providing a logical

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framework for investigating and understanding the world around us. On the other hand, faith acts as a lens that broadens our vision, allowing for a deeper understanding of divine mysteries and providing a sense of meaning and purpose to human existence.

According to Costa (2014) and Novaes (2007), the relationship between faith and reason is one of complementarity, not contradiction. Instead of eclipsing reason, faith enriches it, enabling it to see beyond the visible and the tangible, entering the realms of the transcendental and the spiritual. In this sense, faith functions as a catalyst for the expansion of the horizons of reason, encouraging the exploration of questions that go beyond the limits of purely scientific understanding. This symbiosis between faith and reason not only strengthens the intellectual and spiritual journey of the human being, but also opens new horizons for the investigation of ultimate truth.

Instead of being conceived as opposite poles, faith and reason reveal themselves as inseparable partners in the search for truth and meaning. Faith offers a perspective that transcends the limitations of purely empirical reason, while reason provides a solid foundation for faith, allowing for a critical and rational approach to spiritual issues. This dynamic interplay between faith and reason enriches not only each person's individual journey, but also enriches dialogue between different religious traditions and philosophical perspectives, fostering a deeper and more inclusive understanding of the complexities of the human experience.

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By exploring evil through different lenses, one discovers that its nature is multifaceted and complex. It is not just an absence of goodness, but rather an intricate tangle of moral, physical, and existential questions that defy comprehension. According to Novaes (2007), a multidisciplinary approach is necessary, contemplating not only the theological and philosophical aspects, but also the scientific and psychological spheres. Only in this way is it possible to glimpse the various layers of this intriguing phenomenon.

In the context of Augustinian reflection on evil, the human will stands out as a fundamental element. Augustine (2000) emphasizes the duality inherent to freedom of choice: although it grants the power to determine one's own destiny, it also exposes one to the risk of evil. The will, when diverted from its original purpose, can become a source of sin and suffering, as the author warns.

However, Augustine (2014) does not limit himself to exposing the negative consequences of this deviation of will; It offers a message of hope. The author believes in the possibility of redemption, in the restoration of the human will by divine grace. Even in the midst of the darkness of sin, Augustine glimpses a light that can lift beyond the limitations imposed by the fall.

This Augustinian perspective on the human will reflects not only his theological understanding, but also an optimistic view of the human being's capacity for transformation and renewal. By recognizing the potential for both evil and good in the human will, Augustine

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invites us to contemplate not only human weaknesses but also the possibilities for growth and redemption that reside in each individual. In confronting the mystery of evil, we are invited by Augustine on a philosophical journey that transcends the limits of the human intellect.

On this winding path, we are challenged to seek answers, even if they confront the finiteness of understanding in the face of the infinite divine mystery. In addition to theological and philosophical approaches, Augustine leads us through a deep psychological analysis of evil. It leads us to explore the depths of the human will, investigating the motivations and impulses that lead us to choose between good and evil.

In short, Augustine's work echoes through the centuries, offering profound and provocative insights into the intersection of faith, reason, and human will. It is an invitation to constant reflection, to the incessant search for truth and to the rediscovery of the connection with the divine. His legacy challenges us to confront evil in all its manifestations, but it also inspires us to glimpse the possibility of redemption and transcendence through divine grace.

St. Augustine goes beyond the simple theological analysis of evil and delves into the depths of human psychology, recognizing that the human will, despite its intrinsic freedom, is influenced by a complex network of factors. From individual desires and passions to the social conditioning that permeates the fabric of society, Agostinho (2000) understands that these elements shape and direct human choices.

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This psychological approach to evil offers a broader perspective on the complexities of human nature, highlighting how estrangement from God makes human beings susceptible to the influences of sin and temptation. Augustine recognizes the inherent fragility of the human condition, while also emphasizing the individual's ability to exercise his free will and choose the path of virtue and redemption, even in the face of social pressures and natural inclinations to evil.

In this view, Augustine reveals the constant tension between freedom and the influence of the external environment, between the capacity for individual choice and social conditioning. This duality is essential to understanding the dynamics of human will and its relationship with evil. By acknowledging both the vulnerability and responsibility of human beings in their choices, Augustine offers a complex and multifaceted portrait of the human condition in the face of the dilemma of evil.

Thus, for Augustine, the human will is not only a free and autonomous agent, but is also subject to a complex interaction with the internal and external impulses that shape its decisions. This deep understanding of human psychology enriches his analysis of evil, highlighting the importance of considering not only the theological dimensions but also the psychological and social nuances involved in the individual's moral trajectory.

Additionally, the philosopher addresses the crucial role of the community in the moral formation of the individual. He stresses the importance of education and example as fundamental means in the transmission of ethical and spiritual values. Augustine argues that living in society can both strengthen and corrupt the human will, depending on the influences and moral standards that predominate in the environment (Agostinho, 2000).

Through his works, the thinker not only seeks to clarify the theological and philosophical questions of evil, but also to offer practical guidelines for a virtuous and harmonious life. It encourages individuals to cultivate virtue, to resist temptations, and to constantly seek reconciliation with both God and neighbor (Augustine, 2000).

3 ST. AUGUSTINE'S VIEW OF EVIL AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH HUMAN NATURE

The understanding of the concept of evil, in the philosophy of St. Augustine, emerges from a deep metaphysical reflection on the nature of being and its relationship with God, the Supreme Good. Augustine postulates that God is the perfect, transcendent Being and the source of all goodness. All things, according to him, exist for, with and by God. This fundamental metaphysical conception permeates his analysis of evil, providing the basis for his understanding of the existence of evil in the world (Augustine, 2019).

For Augustine, the concept of evil goes beyond a simple tangible entity or substance; it is, rather, an absence of perfection, a deprivation of the good. He argues that all creatures, including human beings, carry with them a kind of original lack, an intrinsic lack that drives them to seek to fill this void through processes of change and acquisition. This notion of lack is not seen by Augustine as something negative, but rather as an essential condition for the existence of mutability and development in creatures.

Augustine bases this view of original lack on the notions of measure, form and order, which he considers as universal attributes essential to the goodness of created things (Gilson, 2006). These principles not only define the nature of creatures, but also establish a standard of perfection that they aspire to achieve. In this sense, lack is not simply a lack, but an impulse towards the full realization of these attributes, a journey in search of one's own essence.

By considering evil as a deprivation of good and lack as an inherent condition of existence, Augustine offers a complex and deeply philosophical view of the nature of reality. This understanding not only sheds light on the issue of evil, but also provides a conceptual framework for understanding the purpose and nature of creatures, situating the pursuit of perfection within a broader context of cosmic and divine order. Thus, evil, according to Augustine, arises when at least one of these attributes is corrupted. The more these perfections are corrupted, the greater is the degree of evil present in nature. However,

evil is not only the absence of good, but a deprivation that is immersed in a good, as in its subject. This complex view of evil highlights its intrinsic nature and its intimate relationship with good (Costa, 2002).

It is important to emphasize that, for Augustine, evil cannot exist outside the context of good. He argues that only from these metaphysical principles is it possible to understand the presence of evil in the world. However, Augustine emphasizes that evil was not created by God. According to his view, the Supreme Good does not create anything with a corruptible nature, only good things. Thus, God created the good world and granted man the free will to choose his way of living (Augustine, 2019).

In St. Augustine's philosophy, the analysis of evil is deeply intertwined with metaphysical and ethical issues, outlining a complex framework that addresses not only the nature of evil but also human nature and its relationship to the divine. Augustine argues that God, as the Supreme Good, is the source of all goodness and perfection, and all things exist in relation to Him. This metaphysical conception lays the foundation for his understanding of evil in the world (Augustine, 2019).

For Augustine, evil is not a substantial entity in itself, but rather a deprivation of good. He develops this idea by arguing that all creatures possess a kind of original lack, an inherent lack that leads them to seek to fill that lack. This condition, configured by the universal attributes of measure, form, and order, makes created things

good. However, the corruption of these attributes results in evil, which is a deprivation immersed in good (Gilson, 2006).

Human freedom plays a central role in Augustine's understanding of evil. He states that God has granted man free will, enabling him to choose between doing good or subverting the natural order toward evil. Thus, moral evil arises as a consequence of human freedom, not being imposed by God, but the result of the free choices of human beings (Evans, 1995).

Reason is another crucial element in Augustine's approach to evil. He holds that God created man with an eternal Law, a natural ordering that guides him to seek connection with the divine and to prioritize rational living over material pleasures. This natural ordering allows human beings to choose between doing good by good will or subverting this law by ill will, choosing worldly pleasures to the detriment of God (Agostinho, 2019; Cary, 2013).

Augustine also addresses the role of original sin in the origin of evil. He explains that God created the first man in a state of grace, incorruptible and immortal, whose will was subject to reason. However, the sin of the first man altered this initial nature, resulting in the loss of sanctifying grace and the mark of original sin that affects all of humanity (Gilson, 2006).

Through divine grace, Augustine believes that it is possible to restore the lost order. God bestows his grace upon those who consent to act willingly, enabling them to act in conformity with divine wisdom
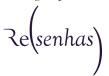
without compromising their freedom. Thus, grace enables man to do good freely, without deviating from the rational purpose established by God (Augustine, 1995; Oliveira, 1995).

In summary, for Augustine, evil is a deprivation of the good that arises from human freedom deviated from the rational purpose established by God. His analysis encompasses not only the metaphysical origin of evil but also its manifestation in the human world, emphasizing the importance of reason, freedom, and divine grace in the pursuit of redemption and virtue.

For him, the condition of original sin, inherited from Adam and Eve, weakened and corrupted the human will, making it prone to evil. He describes this condition as curvata in se, a curvature in on oneself, which makes it difficult to fully achieve the good and inclines the pursuit of selfish satisfaction and pleasure (Brown, 2005).

Furthermore, Augustine points out that human freedom alone is not enough to overcome sin and evil. He emphasizes the importance of divine grace in the redemption and transformation of the human will, arguing that only through God's grace can the will be restored to its original state of seeking the good and union with the divine (Silva, 2008). Thus, for the philosopher, evil is intrinsically linked to the human will, with sin being its primary source.

However, Augustine also highlights the crucial role of divine grace in the regeneration of the human will and in overcoming evil. His thought profoundly influenced subsequent Christian thought, shaping

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the understanding of human nature, freedom, and the importance of divine grace in the fight against evil (Silva, 2008). In his works, Augustine delves deeply into these complex relationships between evil and the human will, offering a detailed theological and philosophical analysis.

Augustine's legacy resonates with later Christianity, especially in the understanding of human nature and the need for divine grace to overcome evil. His thorough and profound approach significantly influenced the development of theological and philosophical thought, outlining a path to understanding the human condition and the search for redemption (Cary, 2013).

Therefore, Augustine's contributions offer a comprehensive and profound insight into evil and its relationship to the human will, highlighting both the inherent fragility of the human condition and the hope of redemption through divine grace. His legacy endures as a beacon in exploring the moral and spiritual complexities of human existence, continuing to inspire thinkers and believers throughout the centuries (Cary, 2013).

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

St. Augustine's view of the origin of evil and its relationship to human nature reveals an approach that transcends the boundaries between theology, philosophy, and psychology. His ideas about evil as a
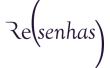
deprivation of good, its link to original sin, and the influence of the human will in this context have been explored throughout this study.

He highlights the importance of the freedom of the human will in choosing between good and evil, while original sin is pointed out as the catalyst for the entry of evil into the human world. In addition, it emphasizes the need for divine grace as a means of overcoming evil, offering a vision of hope and redemption for humanity. By connecting faith, reason, and human will, Augustine invites reflection on fundamental questions of human existence and the search for answers to the mystery of evil.

His multidisciplinary approach and psychological analysis of evil offer valuable insights into understanding the complexities of human nature and the moral challenges we face. Ultimately, St. Augustine's reflections echo in contemporary debates about evil and ethics, inspiring the search for a virtuous life and the cultivation of a deeper relationship with the divine. His legacy invites us to confront evil with courage and hope, confident in the capacity of the human will to choose the good and in the divine grace that underpins this journey.

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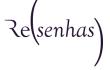
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