

ONTOLOGY OF GOOD AND EVIL IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF GREAT CHRISTIAN TEACHERS AND SAINTS

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ABSTRACT

Description: *The article analyzes the thoughts of Great Christian Teachers of the 4th century-Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Theologian and Gregory of Nyssa, regarding the essential foundations of such philosophical categories as good and evil.*

The Subject of the Study: *The subject is philosophical categories of good and evil in the works of Christian saints.*

Methodology: *The research is based on the historical and philosophical and conceptual and comparative analysis of available sources on this issue (the works of Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Theologian and Gregory of Nyssa), performed by using hermeneutic, dialectical and comparative-comparative methods.*

The Results of the Study: *The author's state that the ontology of good developed in the works of the Great Teachers is based on the Christian synergistic world view. They also describe the essential features of good and evil contained in the interpretations of the Great Saints.*

Practical Implications: *The authors emphasize that the Christian ontology of good and evil as ethical categories cannot be understood without the awareness of faith in Salvation and the future eternal life. The understanding of anthropodicy's nature is revealed on the basis of this statement.*

Value/Originality: *It is proved that the highest manifestation of charity is peacemaking as the demonstration of love and mercy, which is extremely important for a philosophical understanding of the prospects of Ukraine's exit from the current acute socio-political crisis.*

Keywords: God, Christianity, Good, Evil, Ontology, Anthropodicy.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of formation and moral realization of personality is becoming increasingly problematic in the modern world, which is marked by a deep crisis of anthropologism and the loss of established value orientations, which are also experienced in Ukraine. How to preserve

the human in a person? How to force a person to voluntarily choose the path of good? How to ensure the benefits of altruism and compassion in any life situation? These and many other issues are becoming increasingly important nowadays, as the pervasive impact of new technologies and manipulation of human consciousness is becoming increasingly appalling. Therefore, ethical aspect existing in modern thought can be seen as an attempt to find answers to painful questions of today and to explore the main problem of the ontology-the balance of good and evil.

While studying this problem, one cannot fail to mention the legacy of Basil the Great (Basil, 2008), John Chrysostom (Chrysostom, 1989), Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzen, 1912) and Gregory of Nyssa (Nyssen, 1863). The works of these prominent preachers and thinkers of the 4th century not only enshrined the canons of the Christian faith, but also presented the Bible-based early Christian view of such categories as good and evil, which served as one of the cornerstones in the ontological foundation of European philosophy. However, this foundation was largely absorbed by later deposits of secular rationalism, which, in our opinion, largely caused the moral crisis of modern society. Therefore, today there is an urgent need to return to early Christian sources in order to restore understanding of the basic categories that determine our worldview.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology of our study is determined by the features based on the understanding of the ontological nature of ethics, in which morality is perceived as one of the steps of human initiation into spirituality, understood as a person's appeal to the Absolute.

The research is based on the historical and philosophical and conceptual and comparative analysis of available sources on this issue (the works of Basil the Great (Basil, 2008), John Chrysostom (Chrysostom, 1989), Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzen, 1912) and Gregory of Nyssa (Nyssen, 1863)), performed by using hermeneutic, dialectical and comparative-comparative methods.

The specifics of the object of study also determined the methods used in the article. Thus, the research used classical methods of reflection: analytical, deductive, synthetic methods, the method of comparative analysis (comparative and historical, comparative and genetic) and theoretical modeling method. Actual philosophical techniques were also applied in the course of the study, namely: phenomenological, hermeneutic methods, in particular the method of textual analysis, method of methodological symmetry, covering dialectical methodology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Religious philosophy, the sources of which originate from the Bible, proceeds from the priority of ontology and considers the unity of good and divine as the original postulate. But in this paradigm the ethical component, although acting as a derivative, is inseparable from the existent, because the value of human activity and social relations is recognized through the category of absolute good, and its meaning lies in the pursuit of God, which determines their true spiritual moral meaning. Higher world and the earthly human world are inseparable in the works of Christian thinkers, because God accepted the human image in Christ and opened the way to salvation to people through the Resurrection.

It is on this synergetic worldview that the ontology of good described in the works of great teachers is based. Gregory of Nyssa proclaimed that “*good, and that above all good, is the Lord himself (Nyssen, 1863).*” It is obvious that in this case the saint distinguished between the absolute Good, which is the Almighty, and the good as a value that is perceived by people. But since man perceives the Good not only with the mind as transcendence, but also directly feels Him in his own soul, which the Lord has endowed him with, it is a question of integral good. Such indivisibility of good can be considered a reflection of the unity of the Holy Trinity, which was actually proved by the Council of Great Saints. Gregory the Theologian clearly points out that it is from God that “*every good receives its origin and comes to perfection*” (Nazianzen, 1912). Thus, the recognition of the existence of the absolute Good and its existential unity removes the problem of infinite interpretations of the axiological content of the good characteristic of modern postmodernism.

Theodicy developed by Christian thinkers also solves such a difficult question as how to reconcile faith in the almighty and God with the presence of world evil? Reflecting on the ontology of good and evil, the Holy Fathers categorically rejected one of the manifestations of dualism, whose adherents believed that the God is the source of both good and evil. The great teachers strongly condemned the essentially atheistic view that God is the creator of evil (Basil, 2008). The explanation lies in the fact that:

“One should not imagine that evil has a special independence, because evil does not exist in its own, but appears to the detriment of the soul similarly, evil is not some independent nature that can be conveniently described (Nazianzen, 1912)”

This statement implies that in the absolute there is only good, and evil has a derived existential status and is actually interpreted as “*deprivation of good*” (Basil, 2008). Thus, the theodicy of the great saints denies the existence of its own ontological status of evil.

Gregory of Nyssa (Nyssen, 1863) compares the realm of good and the realm of evil; the former one is linked to the visible world, which is filled with light, and the latter one-with the darkness. And therefore, says Gregory of Nyssa, if we assume that someone will be able to cross the distance to which the shadow extends; then it will certainly appear in the light, which is not suppressed by darkness.

Good is not only existent for a human being, but also the desire for the future; it is no accident that saints say that good is light, because good is both substance and motion (as light is both particles and waves). So good is movement and evil is fading (Chrysostom, 1898).

Based on the studies of the relevant literature (Chrysostom, 1898) we can draw the following conclusions: firstly, evil, unlike good, is not the original sign of the God-created world; secondly, evil is temporal, while good is eternal; and finally, evil is the result of arbitrariness, diabolical pride, the desire to become not the resemblance of God, which is the real goal of good for man.

Good and evil are endowed with the same degree of reality in all variations of the dualistic ontology; they act as two opposing impersonal beginnings or as two opposing personal forces-two opponents, aimed at the final victory over each other. Thus, evil is interpreted as a dialectical component of the world order, which, thus, acquires a supposedly natural conflict nature. The great saints disagreed with this and offered their synergetic vision of the world. Gregory the Theologian proclaimed:

“...and according to my teaching, there is only one God without beginning, who does not fight with anyone; the only good Light (Nazianzen, 1912)”

This thesis, in turn, contains the basis for answering the next ontological question of theology-why does God allow the existence of evil? But to understand it, we must turn again to the ontological explanation of the Holy Fathers about the root cause of evil. *“God created the soul, not sin. The soul was damaged, by evading what is natural to it”* (Basil, 2008). John Chrysostom further proclaimed: *“God is not the cause of evil in hell, but we are”* (Chrysostom, 1898). Thus, according to the logic of great teachers, entering into a duel with evil, a person, in fact, is fighting within himself (herself). But this logic did not lead the Christian saints to the apocalyptic absurdity in style of Camus characteristic of secularized existentialism of the 20th century, because they were filled with the humanistic optimism that was clearly manifested in the message of John Chrysostom:

“Do not be afraid of the devil, even though it is disembodied, because it has fallen, and there is nothing weaker than the fallen, even if it is not endowed with a body; just as there is nothing stronger than one who has courage (before God), even if he is endowed with a mortal body (Chrysostom, 1898)”

The belief that, on the one hand, *“that we are created to the image and similarity of God”*, but on the other hand-*“He ordered us to be workers in likening God, and to receive the reward for this work, so that we are not inert things, like portraits created by the hand of the artist, so that the fruits of our likeness do not bring praise to anyone else”* is at the heart of their philosophy (Basil, 2008). As we can see, the interpretations of the great saints laid the basis for solving some of the problems facing by modern philosophy. In particular, the analysis of theological views of great Christian teachers and saints on the ontology of good and evil allows not only to overcome the division between ontology and metaphysics of good and evil (Levinas, 2000), but also to show the inextricable link between ontological and anthropological aspects of philosophical data and categories, thus solving the problem of ethicization of existence and ontologization of ethics (Saikina, 2015).

Under the critique of the claims of secular philosophers, in particular Hartmann (2002), on the loss of the religious ontology of the category of morality as human responsibility, it should be emphasized that great teachers were constantly repeating that by giving freedom of choice to a person, God placed great responsibility on him (her).

“It is not the devil who harms people, but their own carelessness. The devil is not to blame for our sins, if only we are careful; just weak will carelessly falls into the many abysses of sin without the help of a devil (Chrysostom, 1898)”

The core of the understanding of the nature of anthropodicy (human justification), which solves the question of how to reconcile the belief that man is created by God according to this image and like Himself, perfect and intelligent, with the existing imperfections and sinfulness, is revealed in the logical reasoning of Chrysostom: *“If the guilt of those sins was the devil, they would not have been punished, because the other one sinned and prompted them to sin”* (Chrysostom, 1898).

It is from the standpoint of this anthropodicy that great teachers formulated the answer to the question that has a sacramental meaning: why does God not destroy the devil (i.e. evil as such)? Firstly, those who win are much more worthy of honor than those who are defeated. And

secondly, the winner suffers when he hits his enemy, as, in doing so, he does not show his strength (Chrysostom, 1898). On the other hand, according to the saints, evil as a punishment can even be useful, like a certain dose of snake venom in the skillful hands of a doctor. In general, the comparison of God with a physician is widespread in the interpretation of the essence of Christian ethics.

According to this allegory, evil was interpreted in two senses by Christian thinkers: as a disease of the human soul, and as a means of healing. According to Chrysostom, the first one is real evil, such as fornication, adultery, greed, and innumerable defects that deserve extreme condemnation and punishment; the second one is not really evil, just only interpreted by people as such (hunger, disease, natural disasters and even death) (Chrysostom, 1898).

Basil Great was of the same view. He divided evil into the evil, which is such by its very nature, and the evil, which exists in our senses.

“Evil by nature such as untruth, debauchery, misunderstanding, cowardice, envy, murder, poison, lies, and all similar passions depends on us. We also call evil what it is difficult and painful for us to perceive: physical illness, bodily wounds, lack of necessary, shame, damage to property, loss of relatives (Basil, 2008)”

The first evil is worth of curses and condemnation; it is not God’s work, but the invention of our will. The second one serves for the destruction of the former (Basil, 2008). As John Chrysostom stated, the God’s purpose of the first one is to tame human’s pride and encourage everyone to know everything in moderation (Chrysostom, 1898), and the purpose of the second one is suffering, which punishes us, makes us valiant and more caring, leads to wisdom (Chrysostom, 1898). So, the God’s wrath is not evil, it is a way to motivate a person to move towards good.

“Therefore, evil is a sin in the proper sense; this evil, the most worthy of this name, depends on our will; because it is in our will either to refrain from vice, or to be wrong. Some sins are needed to show courage; the others are sent as cure for sins (Chrysostom, 1898)”

Note that according to the reasoning of great teachers, although God uses evil as a stimulus, it does not in any way take human behavior beyond the scope of ethical evaluation.

It is important to note the difference in Christian criteria of morality defined by the great saints, which lays in the fact true good, is not done because of fear of punishment.

“God is not forced to do anything, but committed by virtue, taught Basil the Great, virtue comes from dismissal, not from necessity; and will depends on what we have; and what we have is free (Nazianzen, 1912)”.

As we can see, this teaching is much higher in its ethical content than the well-known Marxist formula *“freedom is a conscious necessity”*. Based on this, the great Christian teacher gave a comprehensive answer to the difficult question of anthropodicy: *“The one who condemns the Creator, who did not make us sinless by nature, does nothing but prefer foolish, immovable nature to intelligent and active one”* (Nazianzen, 1912). Obviously, this conclusion can be assessed as a real anthem of humanism, which has nothing to do with anti-religious prejudices.

Describing the ontology of evil as a derivative essence, the great Christian thinkers have revealed its dual mixed nature, which is different from the purity and integral homogeneity of good.

“...only the nature of evil is mixed: there is destruction inside of it, like a hidden deception, but there is a seductive idea of good on the surface. Real goodness is simple by its nature, alien to any duality (Nyssen, 1863)”.

Based on this, we can conclude that the dominance of “*interpretations of truth*” characteristic of the postmodern era and the dominance of politics and so the ethics of “*double standards*” engendered by it, are in fact the attempts to justify evil, which is diverse and hidden, known and revealed by others on experience.

The great saints not only emphasized the relativity and duality of evil, but also showed that evil is introverted in its direction, in contrast to good, which in essence combines both introverted and extroverted vectors. “*Devil is evil, but it is evil for itself, not to us, as long as we are vigilant. This is the property of sin: it is harmful only to itself. Evil is evil for oneself, and good is good for others as well*” (Chrysostom, 1898). This orientation also reveals the other side of theodicy, which discloses its problems in terms of not only the teleology of morality of the inner world of a person, but also social relations. According to John Chrysostom, God mixed good with evil to bring (people) great benefit. On the one hand, good people are in greater glory when, being among those who prevent them from living righteously and lead them to sin, they hold fast to virtue. And, on the other hand, God left the wicked among the righteous, so that they, being the same as the righteous by nature, become equal in the will. “*The benefit (actually) is not from the evil, but from the courage of the good; that’s the benefit of evil for good*” (Chrysostom, 1898). This slogan reveals the great ethical content of the Christian ontology.

This content is vividly reflected in the praxeology of good, which was revealed by the great saints through the interpretation of the meaning of charity, mercy and peace-making. If you become an enemy of evil, forget past insults and enmity; if you love your brothers and sympathize with them, you will be able to become like God (Basil, 2008).

It is important to note that it is through the concepts of love and forgiveness that great teachers have revealed the content of the concept of peace. The opposite of love, they believe, is hatred, anger, irritation, envy, resentment, hypocrisy, and the scourge of war. And therefore “*He, who creates peace, creates it through the transformation of evil, that is, through the change and bringing evil for the better*”, (Basil, 2008). Let us remember that, according to the definition of the great saints, the fight against evil is the highest purpose of a person, and then we will better understand the commandment, according to which the Lord calls His son a peacemaker.

“The Lord gives two gifts at once to those, who have prevented the calamity of war: one gift is the reward, with which they become imitators of God, and the other gift is the feat itself”. The fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, goodness, longsuffering, and all the benefits of the Apostle) appear along with peace (Nyssen, 1863)”

It is obvious that these inferences of Christian thinkers proclaimed in the 4th century are extremely relevant for modern Ukraine.

But one should not assume that peacekeeping is a matter exclusively for politicians. Dramatic events in Ukraine confirm that real peace in society cannot be achieved without killing

evil first and foremost in oneself. This was once pointed out by the great Christian teachers, based on the theistic ontology of good developed by them. Since good is not only that which is delivered to others, therefore the peacemaker in the full sense is called by him who rebellion of flesh and spirit and interpersonal insults of nature in itself leads to peaceful consent.

This conclusion comes from the Christian concept of the synergetic unity of the ontological essence of good as God, which we have already mentioned. *“Since we believe that the Deity is simple and uncomplicated, then, after such pacification, human nature becomes alien to the composition of the dual, exactly returns to good, becoming simple”* explained the meaning of the thesis of the importance of internal peacemaking as a means of charity Gregory of Nyssa (Nyssen, 1863). Thus, peacemaking is presented as a path to inner unity-to good. Therefore, the statement of Mazurik (2010), which she has made when analyzing the basics of Christian ethics: *“Overcoming such duality is the essence of all moral efforts of a person”*. But it should be emphasized that these efforts are presented as having not only ethical but also ontological meaning in the interpretations of great teachers, because the inner unity, i.e. liberation from the temptation of evil and is the reunion with God-the deification that opens the way to paradise.

In this context, considering the dilemma of Husieinov (2011), which is interpreted by him in the sense of whether good is the highest value and principle of human life solely because God orders it, we should pay attention to the short but very capacious statement of Gregory the Theologian, which combines the ontology and teleology of good: *“God is the One from Whom all originate and for Whom all are created”* (Nazianzen, 1912). The answer to the axiological dilemma is also contained in the interpretation of John Chrysostom: *“How the measure of our life is measured by God’s measures, so the God’s measure is measured by life measures”* (Chrysostom, 1898). Based on these guidelines, we can conclude that the teachings of the great Christian saints synergistically combine the ontological status of good as God and its ethical content as the attitude of people to God and as a relationship between people. Confirmation of this can be found by drawing an analogy between the Christian interpretation of goodness and love. As Gregory of Nyssa noted,

“God is also love and the source of love; love is from God, and God is love. This is what made the Creator and our being a distinctive feature. So, where there is no such love, all the features of the image are distorted (Nyssen, 1863)”.

Thus, the dilemma, which is difficult from the point of view of secular ethics, is quickly solved with the help of this instruction of the great teachers, because it becomes clear that good is inseparable from the Creator and is indicated by Him as a guide to God.

But it is extremely important to emphasize that the Christian ontology of good as an ethical category cannot be understood without an awareness of faith in Salvation and future eternal life. Without this belief, the category of good loses its existential content and becomes a purely utilitarian concept typical for modern consumer society. According to the logic of Christian doctrine, earthly good is a movement toward a higher goal, which the Savior made possible.

Rejecting the basic postulate of Christianity about the Resurrection, modern philosophers fall into a logical trap in their attempt to critically evaluate the religious ontology of good and evil. Because how else can one understand the statement of Basil the Great (2008): *“Although*

death is from God, but, without a doubt, death is not evil". But this statement can be interpreted, if we take into account the assertion of John Chrysostom (1898), in the end "*we are given rewards, much more numerous and greater than the losses*".

As we can see, the ontological statement about the infinity of good and the finality of evil serves as a basis for deep axiological inferences. When the great Christian saints claimed that a person was created for good, they meant, on the one hand, the teleological meaning of anthropodicy, according to which man was born to look to God, not to crawl on the earth; not to enjoy the pleasures of cattle, but to prepare oneself for the Kingdom of Heaven (Chrysostom, 1898).

Thus, the ontology of good developed in the works of great teachers is based on the synergetic worldview characteristic of Christianity. They represented the One Good as the absolute good-God, which a person perceives as a certain transcendence and which, at the same time, is immanent to human soul, created by God. Just good exists on its own in the absolute, and evil has a derivative existential status and is in fact interpreted as "*deprivation of good*" or as turning away from God. Thus, evil is not substantially created, but is a consequence of arbitrariness. Good as God is infinite, while evil is limited. Evil is temporal, while good is eternal. Good is movement, and evil is fading. According to the great teachers, evil has a dual mixed nature, which is different from the purity and integral homogeneity of good. Evil is essentially introverted in its direction, in contrast to good, which in essence combines both introverted and extroverted vectors.

CONCLUSION

Evil was interpreted by Christian thinkers in the moral aspect in two senses: real evil is a sin, which is the result of free human choice, and as a means of healing the lost soul, which is used for its own good by the Creator. And this is their answer to the question of theodicy. According to the great teachers, although God uses evil as an incentive, it does not in any way take human behavior beyond the scope of ethical evaluation. After all, having received freedom, a person, according to the plan of the Almighty, became the creator of his (her) own destiny. These inferences form the basis of their humanistic optimism, because man was created for good. They, firstly, reveal the possibility of constant movement towards good, because good is not only being for a man, but also the desire for the future. Secondly, it is man in this movement who fights evil, not God. And this is already the basis for a positive answer to the question of anthropodicy. According to the logic of great teachers, entering into a duel with evil, man, in fact, is fighting within himself to restore his own original unity with good and return to paradise. But true good is not done because of the fear of punishment; it is motivated by inner spiritual motives. Christian thinkers have proved that the highest manifestation of charity is peacemaking as a manifestation of love and mercy, which is extremely important for a philosophical understanding of the prospects of Ukraine's exit from the current acute socio-political crisis.

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