

TRAGIC ERROR AND THE AUGUSTINIAN MORALS

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Thesis Abstract

Kerem Eksen, “Tragic Error and the Augustinian Morals”

The aim of the present thesis is to reconsider the notion of “tragic error” from a philosophical perspective and by concentrating mainly on the thought of Augustine. Our starting-point has been the differences between the ways in which, on the one hand the classical Greek tragedians, and on the other the critics and dramatists of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries problematized human action. While Greek tragedy was based on what we have called an “objective” notion of error (focusing mainly on the objective changes that a given action creates in the universe), the Renaissance and post-Renaissance mentality adopted a “subject-centered” standpoint and a “subjective” notion of error (laying emphasis on the conditions and qualities of the agent of an act).

Augustine is the main figure of our project, since his work sheds light on the shift from an “objective” conception of error to a “subjective” one. On the basis of this idea, we presented the two major dimensions of Augustine’s ethical theory: On the one hand, we focused on the “subjective” aspects of Augustine’s theory of sin, in order to see how he defines sin on an individual basis; and on the other hand, we studied the “objective” aspects of his theory, in order to see how Augustine relates the experience of error to an “objective” condition of fallibility. We have argued that these two aspects of Augustine’s thought lie at the basis of Renaissance tragedy and that, in this sense, tragic poets like Racine and Shakespeare are post-Augustinian.

Tez Özeti

Kerem Eksen, “Trajik Hata ve Augustinus’çu Ahlak”

Bu çalışmanın amacı “trajik hata” kavramını felsefi bir bakış açısıyla ve Augustinus’un düşüncesine odaklanarak yeniden tartışmaktır. Tezin başlangıç noktası, bir yandan Antik Yunan’daki tragedya yazarlarının, diğer yandan da 17. ve 18. yüzyıl eleştirmenleri ve yazarlarının insan eylemini sorunsallaştırma biçimlerindeki farklılıklar olmuştur. Yunan tragedyası bizim “nesnel” şeklinde nitelendirdiğimiz (öncelikli olarak bir eylemin evrende yol açtığı nesnel değişiklikleri dikkate alan) bir hata anlayışı barındırıyordu. Rönesans ve Rönesans-sonrası dönemdeyse “özne-merkezli” bir bakış açısı benimsenmiş, edimleri gerçekleştiren failin koşullarına ve niteliklerine öncelik veren “öznel” bir hata anlayışı geliştirilmiştir.

Augustinus tezimizin merkezi düşünürüdür, zira onun çalışması “nesnel” bir hata anlayışından “öznel” bir hata anlayışına geçişi aydınlayabilecek niteliktedir. Bu düşünceden hareketle, çalışmamızda Augustinus’un ahlak teorisinin iki temel boyutu üzerinde durduk: Bir yandan Augustinus’un günah teorisinin “öznel” unsurlarını ele alarak düşünürün günahı nasıl bireysel bir temelde tarif ettiğine değindik; diğer yandan da düşünürün teorisinin “nesnel” unsurları üzerinde durarak, hata deneyiminin “nesnel” bir “hataya yatkın olma” koşuluyla nasıl ilişkilendirildiğini gösterdik. Buradan hareketle, Augustinus’un düşüncesinin bu iki boyutunun Rönesans tragedyalarına temel teşkil ettiğini ve, bu anlamda, Racine ve Shakespeare gibi trajik şairlerin Augustinus-sonrası şairler olduğunu öne sürdük.

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To my parents...

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Presentation of the Problematic | 1 |
| Remarks on the Terminology..... | 8 |
| Thesis Plan | 19 |
| PART I: THE PROBLEM OF ERROR IN GREEK TRAGEDY | |
| CHAPTER II: OBJECTIVE ERROR AND GREEK TRAGEDY..... | 23 |
| The <i>Agamemnon</i> “Riddle” | 24 |
| The Notion of “Objective Error”..... | 36 |
| <i>Agamemnon</i> Revisited: Paradoxes of Human Error..... | 47 |
| Greek Philosophy and the Objectivity of Error | 61 |
| CHAPTER III: “SUBJECTIFICATION” OF TRAGIC ERROR: ARISTOTLE AND HIS READERS | 69 |
| <i>Hamartia</i> in <i>Poetics</i> | 71 |
| <i>Hamartia</i> after Aristotle..... | 78 |
| PART II: AUGUSTINE AND THE PROBLEM OF ERROR | |
| Preliminary Remarks..... | 91 |
| CHAPTER IV: AUGUSTINE AGAINST THE MANICHEANS: THE CHALLENGE OF “OBJECTIVITY” AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF “SUBJECTIVE” ELEMENTS..... | 98 |
| Augustine and Manichaeism: The Problem of Objectivity of Error | 99 |
| The Plotinian Turn and the Perseverance of Objectivity | 104 |
| Inward Turn and the “Privacy” of the Augustinian Inner Space | 119 |
| Against Objectivity: The Will and its Choices | 131 |
| Conclusion | 162 |
| CHAPTER V: AUGUSTINE AGAINST PELAGIUS: THE CHALLENGE OF “SUBJECTIVE ERROR” AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF “OBJECTIVE” ELEMENTS..... | 165 |
| Augustine and the Pelagians | 166 |
| The History of <i>Voluntas</i> (I): Adam, Eve and the Original Sin..... | 170 |
| The History of <i>Voluntas</i> (II): Human Condition After the Fall | 187 |
| Augustine and the “Tragic Vision” | 208 |

PART III: TRAGIC ERROR AFTER THE RENAISSANCE

| | |
|---|-----|
| CHAPTER VI: POST-AUGUSTINIAN TRAGEDY. RACINE AND SHAKESPEARE | 223 |
| Racine..... | 231 |
| Shakespeare..... | 249 |
| Conclusion: Augustine and the post-Renaissance Tragedy | 269 |
| CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION. TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF OBJECTIVE ERROR | 273 |
| REFERENCES..... | 287 |

ABBREVIATIONS

Aristotle :

NE : Ethika Nikomakheia

Augustine :

Ad Simpl. : Ad Simplicianum

Conf. : Confessiones

Con. Fort. : Contra Fortunatum

De civ. : De civitate Dei

De div. quaest. : De diversis quaestionibus

De duab. : De duabus animabus

De lib. arb. : De libero arbitrio

De mor. ecc. : De moribus ecclesiae

De trin. : De trinitate

Ench. : Enchiridion

Retr. : Retractationes

Tr.in Joann. ev. : In Iohannis evangelium tractatus

Plotinus :

En. : Enneads

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Presentation of the Problematic

Since Aristotle's use of the term *hamartia* (error)¹ in Book 13 of *Poetics*, a complicated web of interrogations has been woven around Greek tragic heroes. Throughout the different stages of this long enquiry, the reader has come across a multitude of hypotheses concerning the "motives" or "intentions" of tragic heroes, the attenuating circumstances of their misdeeds, their secret relations with their fellow men or their gods and their special place in the irreversible machinery called "Fate". This abundant literature, created at the intersection of the fields of aesthetics, ethics, law, psychology, theology and philology, has given birth to highly precious theoretical debates, as well as a great deal of anachronisms, false assumptions and forced associations. To repeat Stephen Halliwell's terms, what has occurred is an unfinished process of "*hamartia*-hunting."²

What is the point of this lively debate? In effect, by its insurmountable complexity, the notion of tragic error constitutes a good opportunity for discovering new strategies while discussing human action. However, it is obvious that complexity is not the sole virtue of the notion. Indeed, all central notions of philosophy (or those of

¹ To make an unbiased translation of this much-debated term is very difficult. As we will show in Chapter II of the present work, the term covers a wide range of meanings. For this reason, we have chosen the neutral and general term "error" to translate it. Since our thesis is mainly focused on the use of the term in the literature on tragedy, we will usually refer to it as "tragic error."

² Halliwell (1998), p. 220.

literary criticism) are complex and invite the reader to rewarding discussions. From the standpoint of philosophy, however, the notion of tragic error embodies a particular sort of challenge: It is one of the central concepts of a *theoretical* enterprise that aims at the elucidation of an obviously *non-theoretical*, artistic form. In a sense, “tragic error” is a tool that the theoretician uses with the intention of having access to a world outside of theory.

In order to understand the particularity of this challenge, we need further clarification about the sense in which “tragedy” is situated outside the sphere of theoretical activity. From a general perspective, there is nothing particularly philosophical about this “otherness.” All literary works, by their very nature, show some resistance against their being incorporated into a theoretical discourse. However, tragedy is special in that its otherness has had a unique theoretical significance and has been considered to be a central philosophical problem. For the German idealists, as well as for a considerable number of their inheritors, the abyss existing between philosophical enterprise and tragedy constituted a major problem. Since Schelling, the question pertaining to tragedy and the “tragic” has been conceived as a new possibility for philosophical reflection. Far from being limited to the field of aesthetics, this question has constituted an opportunity to go *beyond* the limits set by Kant’s critical enterprise.

Schelling opened the 10th of his *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (one of his earliest works dated 1795) with an explicit affirmation of his bewilderment in front of Greek tragedy:

A mortal, destined by fate to become a criminal, fights *against* this fate, and yet he is horribly punished for the crime, which was the work of fate! The *reason* for this contradiction, what made it bearable, lay deeper than

the level at which it has been sought: It lay in the conflict of human freedom with the power of the objective world.³

According to Schelling, Greek tragedy has the capability (which is unknown to philosophical enterprise) of making us face the contradictory co-existence of *human freedom* on the one hand and the power of the *objective world* on the other. For this reason, Schelling thought that (as Hölderlin and Hegel would do later on) tragedy constitutes the new horizon of the philosophical speculation.⁴ This did not only mean that tragedy and the tragic should gain priority as strictly philosophical problems, but also that philosophy should take a new turn, transform itself and join “the universal ocean of poesie.”⁵

Even though the present thesis does not have its roots in Schelling’s duality (i.e. “human freedom” vs. “objective world”), it nevertheless follows the general attitude inaugurated by German Idealism and followed by various “thinkers of the tragic” such as Hölderlin, Nietzsche or Rosset. From our standpoint, the most distinctive feature of this attitude may be observed in its preference to see a fundamental tension -and even a fundamental discord- between the ways tragedy and philosophy (or systematic thinking in general) *problematize* human action.

When one considers the legacy of German Idealism, the notion of tragic error gains an additional strategic importance: Since it has been one of the central terms of the

³ “Tenth Letter on Dogmatism and Criticism” in Schmidt (2001), p. 86. Schelling apparently has Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* in mind here. For illuminating remarks on this letter, see Schmidt (2001), pp. 73-83 and Szondi (2002), pp. 7-10.

⁴ The old horizon, as a matter of fact, has been obscured by the death of metaphysics that occurred during the Kantian turn. Dennis Schmidt makes the following illuminating observation on Schelling’s letter: “In the course of this letter it becomes clear that tragedy is ‘the highest in art’ and that when the powers of reason fail, when the philosophy gives out, the disclosive powers of this highest possibility in art still preserve what is most in need of being understood. Art, specifically tragic art, takes over when philosophy comes to an end.” See Schmidt (2001), p. 74.

⁵ *ScW, Schriften von 1799–1801*, p. 629, quoted in Schmidt (2001), p. 74.

field of literary criticism after Aristotle, it betrays all the difficulties and impossibilities that are at stake in the communication between theoretical activity and tragedy. As we have already suggested, “tragic error” may be seen as a key notion, through which the theoretician tries to bridge the rigorous theoretical discourse of ethical reflection with the non-theoretical sphere of tragedy. However, this does not mean that literary critics or philosophers always choose to face the problem of tragic error in a Schellingian manner, that is, with a view to broaden the horizon of theoretical speculation. In a number of significant cases, the reverse is the case: The notion of “tragic error” becomes the literary critic’s primary tool for incorporating the alleged “meaning” of the tragic experience into theoretical (and ethical) discourse. Hence, the term is elaborated in such a way that there stays nothing “tragic” about the “error” in question and that it becomes a mere name for the utterly intelligible reason behind the protagonist’s downfall.⁶

The present thesis will follow the spirit of Schelling’s perspective, in the sense that it will avoid seeing the notion of “tragic error” as a tool to uncover the hidden “meaning” of the tragedies. We think that tragic error should not be used to decipher the secret code of the tragic downfall of Oedipus or Agamemnon. The only theoretical benefit that one may expect from it should be to give us an insight about the complex - and at some points paradoxical- aspects of human action that tragedy makes us face.

These considerations may lead the reader to see the present work as a theoretical attempt to understand what tragic error is. Undoubtedly, this problem will constitute one of our main preoccupations. However, we think that the term “tragic error” should not

⁶ We will present some examples of this attitude in Chapter II.

be the immediate object of a standard philosophical enquiry, where the starting-point would be the question “What is X?”. Such a direct confrontation with the term may have the risk of separating it from its non-philosophical context and subduing it to the rules of rigid theoretical discourse. In fact (and in line with our above-presented claims), we do not think that “tragic error” can be given a satisfactory philosophical definition. This being said, our goal is not to mystify this difficult and complex notion by making it the completely unintelligible secret of tragic art. For these reasons, we will attempt to face the problem of tragic error in an indirect fashion, by focusing on the *reactions* that it has stimulated throughout the history of thought. Hence, one of our initial goals will be to comprehend *the way* the Western mind has understood the problem of tragic error and has coped with it. In this sense, this thesis may primarily be seen as an attempt to understand *the history of the problematizations of human action*⁷ on the basis of the problem of tragic error.

Our starting-point will be the following historical observation: During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which witnessed a “renaissance” in the interest in tragedy, literary critics showed a remarkable tendency to interpret tragedies (and especially the Aristotelian *hamartia*) from a “subjectivist” and usually “moralizing” standpoint. We think that this tendency led to distorting readings of *Poetics*, since, as we will illustrate Chapter III, the Aristotelian interpretation of tragedy did not give the term *hamartia* a specifically moral sense. In fact, it was not even clear whether Aristotle presupposed the existence of an unambiguous relation between the agent and the acts attributed to him/her. For the Stagirite, the question of responsibility was far from

⁷ For our remarks on the notion of “problematization,” see pp. 15-17 below.

constituting a central issue for the interpretation of tragedies. Yet, (as we will show in Chapter III) the French and English critics usually attempted to understand tragic downfalls on the basis of well-defined errors (usually considered as “moral”) which may easily be attributed to particular agents. These errors served them to *justify* the tragic calamities, despite the fact that Aristotle did not bestow any centrality to the equilibrium between the protagonist’s misdeeds and the tragic downfall.

On this basis, we would like to formulate our initial question in the following way: Why were the critics of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries so inclined to put the stress on the “agents of acts,” whom they held morally responsible for the tragic catastrophes? We think that this tendency to “moralize” tragedies cannot be explained with exclusive reference to the rigid moral ambience in France or England during the period in question. We think that this attitude should be seen as the result of a profound transformation in the way human action was problematized since the age of Greek tragedians. As a consequence of this transformation, we argue, the literary critics of the Renaissance found no other way than reading the tragedies with a particular emphasis on the responsibility of the protagonist whose downfall should be justified in one way or another.

On the other hand, it is a plain fact that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not only the age of literary critics, but also (and primarily) of new tragic poets. This period has witnessed what may be named as the second “golden age” of tragic poetry with Marlowe and Shakespeare in England, and Corneille and Racine in France. As we will show in Chapter VI, it seems possible for us to find in the works of Shakespeare or Racine a new sort of “tragic problematization,” which goes beyond the

simplifying approaches of the critics. This means that the transformation that led the critics towards a “subject-centered” outlook is also the basis for the appearance of a new tragic problematization.

We think that certain key aspects of this multifarious transformation can be illuminated by an in-depth study of the critical turning-points of the history of ethical thought. For this reason, it seems rewarding to focus on the works of those thinkers who contributed to this transformation by changing the way in which we conceive human action, error, human individuality and the related ethical questions. Our project is an attempt to have a grasp of a decisive moment of this complex transformation: the Augustinian “turn.”

There are two main reasons for choosing Augustine as the central figure of our study:

The first reason relates to Augustine’s place in the history of ethics, or more generally in the history of ethical problematizations. His philosophy may be conceived as the scene of the transformation that the ethical discourse -inherited from Greek and Latin pagan philosophy- underwent with the rise and dominance of Christianity.

Throughout this transformation, Augustine introduced a series of new conceptions that help us to consider human error as a primarily “subjective” phenomenon. In this sense, it seems rewarding to consider the “Augustinian turn” in order to understand the differences between the ways in which human action has been problematized in Ancient Greece on the one hand, and in Renaissance and post-Renaissance Europe on the other. To put it into clearer terms, there are good reasons for thinking that the Renaissance

reader's "subject-centered" interpretation of tragedy, as well as the "moralizing" tendencies resulting from it, may be better understood by considering Augustine's contributions to the history of ethical thought.

This being said, the choice of Augustine as the central figure of the present enquiry does not result solely from his pivotal role in this historical transformation. We think that there is another dimension of the Augustinian thought (absent from many other philosophers who contributed to this historical transformation) that makes it relevant for our research: Despite the complete absence of any reflection about tragic plays in it, it seems possible to discuss the Augustinian thought (and especially its contribution to the idea of original sin) with a view to enlighten some aspects of the idea of tragic error. As we will explain in Chapter V, this does not mean that the Augustinian theory *as a whole* has tragic dimensions. Nevertheless, we think that some aspects of Augustine's thought may be integrated (and have in fact been integrated by future generations) into a tragic conception of life. In this sense, it seems plausible to consider some aspects of the Augustinian thought in order to understand how a tragic problematization (such as Racine's or Shakespeare's) could be conceived in the Christian era and which role the notion of tragic error played in it.

Remarks on the Terminology

While discussing the ancient Greek or Renaissance tragedies, as well as Augustine's relevance for dealing with them, we will make constant reference to two pairs of adjectives: "tragic" vs. "ethical" and "objective" vs. "subjective." It is now time to

clarify what we mean by these terms, what benefit we expect from their use and which risks they bring with them.

“Tragic” and “Ethical”

Throughout our work, we will distinguish between two strategies for coping with the question of human error, namely the “ethical problematizations” (as presented in Aristotle or Augustine) and “tragic problematizations” (as presented in Aeschylus, Shakespeare or Racine). While making this distinction, however, our primary goal is not to emphasize the abyss that separates those strategies, but rather to shed light on the points of contact between them. Consequently, while studying tragedies, we will dwell on those aspects that might be the objects of an ethical problematization, such as responsibility or culpability. While studying the philosophical enterprises (especially that of Augustine), we will focus on those aspects that seem to call for a tragic problematization.

However, approaching the history of the “ethical” from the standpoint of the “tragic” may lead us to a methodological difficulty: It may be difficult to “historicize” the idea of “tragic” in the same way as we do the idea of “ethical” or some major ethical notions such as responsibility, freedom of choice or agency.

This difficulty has a simple reason: The notion of the “tragic,” as it is used as part of a philosophical agenda, is a relatively new invention compared to many of the ethical notions. Before it gained its philosophical connotations, the term “tragic” has been a byproduct of the history of tragedy for a long time. Although the adjective is present in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (i.e. the first treatise in history that focuses on tragedy as a

poetic form), it is far from being the subject of a philosophical enquiry. When Aristotle uses the adjective *tragikos* in the passage where he cherishes Euripides as the “most tragic of all tragic poets” (1453a10), he only wants to suggest that the Euripidean tragedy fills most of the conditions that are presented in the *Poetics*. And those conditions relate to certain literary and psychological aspects of the form of tragedy, which are defined on the basis of the effects to be produced on the audience, i.e. the arousal of the feelings of pity and fear.⁸ In this sense, the “tragic” in its Aristotelian guise does not gain a directly philosophical function and it denotes simply “that which relates to tragedy as a literary form.” The Aristotelian tendency to use “tragic” in this limited sense persisted in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries during which the interest in tragedy as a form has reappeared and increased. Neither the Elizabethan tragedians, nor their French successors used the term to denote a fundamental dimension of human life.⁹

It is in Schelling’s *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, which we quoted above, that the question of the tragic has first been raised as a part of a properly philosophical agenda. The famous German literary critic Peter Szondi is quite clear on this point: While Aristotle’s theory and the long tradition that it inspired focused on the “poetics of tragedy,” Schelling’s remarks inaugurated what may be called the

⁸ We do not mean here that Aristotle’s treatment of tragedy in *Poetics* has no philosophical implications. Indeed, the very definition of tragedy that he presents in *Poetics* 1549b invites philosophical reflection. What we mean here is that Aristotle, while using the adjective *tragikos*, does not try to delineate a particular aspect of human experience, as later generations will do when they refer to a “tragic vision of life,” the “tragic dimension of human existence” or a “tragic situation.” Aristotle’s use of the adjective does not go beyond the sphere of literary criticism, in the sense that it is dependent on the category of “tragedy” as a literary form.

⁹ As Marc Escola suggests, the seventeenth century French critics and playwrights define tragedy mainly with reference to Aristotle, i.e. on the basis of the ideal effects of a play on the audience. And here, they generally use the term “*pathétique*” instead of “*tragique*.” See Escola (2002), p. 36.

“philosophy of the tragic.”¹⁰ The former focused mainly on the formal characteristics of the genre as well as the psychological effects that the poet would like to produce on the audience. For the latter, however, the primary interest was “the phenomenon of the tragic” itself, to repeat the title of Max Scheler’s famous essay dated 1915. Beginning with Schelling, the “tragic” began to be conceived as a pivotal philosophical category later to be considered in varying manners by different idealist and post-idealist thinkers. As a matter of fact, the question of “the tragic” has been a central theme for a number of significant nineteenth century philosophers from Hegel to Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard to Nietzsche.

Beginning with this crucial “philosophical turn,” the notion of “tragic” has in some sense gained its independence from tragedy as a literary form. “Tragic” ceased to refer to simply “that which concerns tragedies in general,” and began to denote a basic dimension of the human experience. And in certain significant cases, the tragic has been defined without making any particular reference to the history of tragedy.¹¹ This time, tragedy as a form became dependent on the notion of “the tragic,” in the sense that it began to be defined as a work of art in which the tragic dimension of life is articulated. So much so that one of modern critics’ main goals has been to distinguish the “false” tragedies from the “genuine” ones. According to this distinction, “false” tragedies are those works of art that used to be classified as tragedies but that are, in fact, far from reflecting “the tragic.”

¹⁰ Szondi (2002), p. 1.

¹¹ Max Scheler’s famous article entitled “The Phenomenon of the Tragic” is a good example for this attitude. Clément Rosset is another important thinker whose theory of the tragic owes very little to the interpretation of tragic texts. See Scheler (1952) and Rosset (1991, 2000).

Once the “tragic” began to be formulated separately, there arose two interrelated problems for the one who wants to treat the question of the tragic from a more or less historical perspective, i.e. with reference to the history of tragedy or the history of ethical problematizations.

The first problem arises out of the retrospective attribution of the post-Schellingian notion of “tragic” to works of art belonging to a distant past. Since “the tragic” taken as a philosophical notion is a relatively recent innovation, there is no way to escape from anachronism if we would like to discuss the tragic on the basis of certain concrete examples of tragedies. One has to accept that certain works of art are “tragic” (from a modern perspective), while others, despite their being originally classified as tragedies, are not. Therefore, posing the question of the “tragic” in philosophical terms obliges one to consider certain historical examples on the basis of a modern notion.

This problem of anachronism is accompanied by a related problem of circularity. The philosophical reflection on the concept of the tragic has to a large extent been based on the concrete examples of tragedy, in the sense that the term was usually defined with recourse to certain ideal examples of tragedy such as *Oedipus*, *Antigone* or *Hamlet*. But the adjective “tragic,” derived from a particular group of tragedies considered as the ideal instances of the form, was in its turn used for evaluating tragedies themselves.

One possible strategy for escaping these two fundamental problems has been to adhere to a strictly essentialist standpoint and to conceive the “tragic” as a non-historical category denoting a fundamental metaphysical aspect of human experience, and the particular tragedies as the historical manifestations of this eternal dimension. Max Scheler’s essay on the phenomenon of the tragic represents a good example of this

preference: At the outset, Scheler announces that he will describe “the tragic” without any reference to any work of art in which the notion is presented.¹² This methodological choice has in fact an apparent philosophical ground: Since the tragic is an “essential element” of the universe, one should gain perception of the phenomenon itself before focusing on its particular instantiations, i.e. what Scheler calls “authentic tragedies.” While the sentiments provoked by particular tragic situations are malleable to historical change, the phenomenon itself is not.¹³

While it has the merit of liberating the thinker from the obligation to consider the inexhaustible pile of tragic works, the essentialist strategy is unable (because it is reluctant) to cope with the historical dimension of the tragic. Once the tragic is conceived as completely independent from historical examples, it becomes difficult for the thinker to relate this basic metaphysical category to the history of tragedy.

The other strategy is to take departure from Greek tragedy, which is considered to be the most authentic embodiment of the genuine tragic experience. Accordingly, Greek tragedy -together with the “tragic” that it represents- is a unique event that arose as the outcome of certain social and political conditions and on the basis of particular theological and anthropological conceptions.¹⁴ Once the particular conditions that shaped the fifth century Athenian life changed, the “authentic” tragedy and the original

¹² Scheler (1952), p. 107.

¹³ A recent version of this attitude can be found in William Storm’s book *After Dionysus*: “The tragic is neither evolutionary nor subject to visionary points of view [...] but refers instead to an unalterable status of being” (Storm (1998), p. 34). “The tragic condition itself is timeless and constant” (ibid., p. 32). “It is eternal to precisely the extent that mortal beings live and continue to be aware, not only of their own mortality but of the divisive forces that inevitably separate being from all that is held as valuable” (ibid., p. 32).

¹⁴ Florence Dupont, who is one of the fiercest advocates of this position, goes as far as arguing that the term “Greek tragedy” is itself tautological, since tragedy is essentially and exclusively Greek. See Dupont (2001), p. 16.

“tragic vision” that it presents have become history. For some thinkers, tragedy can be written (and has in fact been written) only on the basis of the Greek model.¹⁵ For some, it can be written only on the condition that certain historical, social and theological circumstances are present.¹⁶ And for others, Greek tragedy, as well as the particular conditions that created it, cannot be repeated at all.¹⁷

Despite its inclination to historicize the idea of the tragic, we think that this second position cannot totally escape a particular kind of essentialism that would impede the adoption of a purely historical outlook. Once the Greek model is emphasized to the extent of being baptized as *the* original tragic experience, there arises a new hierarchy in evaluating tragedies belonging to different historical periods. Consequently, the history of tragedy is either limited to a period of 80 years in the fifth century Athens (as in the case of Florence Dupont), or conceived as the series of more or less successful repetitions of an allegedly original model. This brings back the essentialist attitude, with the difference that this time “the tragic” is defined on the basis of an historical model, and not with reference to an eternal metaphysical category. We will call this position “historical essentialism.”

As far as our project is concerned, the most significant lesson to be taken from this situation is the following: If we would like to approach the history of ethical thought from the perspective of the philosophical problem of the “tragic,” we cannot escape

¹⁵ This is Jean-Pierre Vernant’s position. He points at the uniqueness of the Greek tragedy without ruling out the possibility to call later literary creations as “tragedies.” Greek tragedy, for him, does not present one possible form of tragedy, but the paradigmatic model. See Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), v. II, pp. 79-90.

¹⁶ Nietzsche’s position in *The Birth of Tragedy* is probably the most remarkable and philosophically significant instance of this attitude.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin’s highly interesting remarks on “the tragic silence” and his severe criticism of the Nietzschean position in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* present a very insightful articulation of this position. See Benjamin (1985).

from adopting an at least partially *essentialist* standpoint, since a philosophical use of the term “tragic” makes a purely historical perspective impossible.¹⁸ If we intend to evaluate tragedies on the basis of the notion of “tragic” or delineate the “tragic” dimensions of a philosopher’s worldview, we need to begin with a particular set of essential characteristics that define “the tragic.”

In our thesis, we will prevent the use of the former strategy (that we called “metaphysical essentialism”) and we will adhere to the second solution (“historical essentialism”) which seems to be relatively more adequate for being reconciled with a historical perspective. In line with this choice, our emphasis will not be on the notion of “tragic” *per se*, but rather on the particular ways in which human action is problematized in different tragedies belonging to different historical contexts. And here, our starting-point will be Greek tragedies: We will first attempt to reach an adequate formulation of the experience of error in Greek tragedy (especially in Aeschylus), and we will take this mode of experience as one of the basic dimensions of tragedies in general. Hence, the Greek model will shed light on the later examples of tragic problematization and the ways in which they differ from ethical problematizations.

Before moving on to the basic differences between these two categories (i.e. “tragic” and “ethical” problematizations), it may be useful to briefly dwell on the concept of “problematization”. We borrow the term from Michel Foucault, although we use it to specify a field of research that is narrower than his. For Foucault, the term is of key importance in distinguishing his own field of research, which he calls “the history of

¹⁸ One may rightly object to this argument and state that no concept can be treated from a purely historical perspective, since the actual signification of it will generally be considered as a starting-point for understanding its earlier uses. When, for example, we trace the genealogy of a term like “ethics,” we would probably be inclined to say that the old use of the term was different from its present use. In the case of the “tragic,” however, even such a genealogy is impossible, since the term is a recent invention.

thought,” from “the history of ideas.” The latter, according to him, is preoccupied with the context in which a particular concept appears and the way the concept develops in history, as a part of different contexts. The history of thought, on the other hand, is the history of “problematizations”. It is

[...] the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and “silent,” out of discussion, becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions.¹⁹

Our work will follow the spirit of Foucault’s overall project in that its focus will be mainly on the way human action has been *problematized* in different historical phases. Accordingly, we will try to explain the difference between Aristotle’s and post-Renaissance critics’ treatment of tragedies on the basis of the changes that occurred in their respective ways of problematizing the human action. The difference, from this perspective, will not simply be described as a difference between the concepts they use in answering some questions, but also the way those questions are formulated. What is striking for us is not only the inaccuracy of post-Renaissance critics’ interpretations of Aristotle, but the way they located an ancient text into the context of their own problematization of action.

We use the terms “ethical” and “tragic” to qualify -and distinguish between- different strategies that have been adopted for problematizing human action. An “ethical problematization” -which is the usual form that philosophical enquiry on human action takes- deals with human action with a view to render its major dynamics accountable

¹⁹ Foucault (2001), p. 74. This excerpt is sufficient for us to see the extent to which our use of the notion of problematization is narrower than Foucault’s. Foucault’s analysis does not only relate to concepts, but also to the practices and institutions through which these concepts gain new significance.

and its problematic aspects remediable. What we call a “tragic problematization,” instead of adopting this kind of an explanatory and remedying function, aims at a severe confrontation with these aspects. For that matter, it is safe to argue that a tragic problematization is open-ended insofar as its ultimate goal is not to find a remedy for the problems that haunt the human existence. Through a tragic problematization, one can only expose and face those problems. The ethical problematization, on the other hand, is done with the presumption that there is a possibility of elucidating and to some extent remedying the questioned aspects. While the tragic vision faces us with that which is “already there” and “already given,” the ethical standpoint introduces a “causal justification” to the existing state of affairs²⁰ and looks for an antecedent, a sufficient reason, i.e. a general explanation for what happens.²¹

The basic problem of this schematic comparison is that it presents ethical and tragic problematizations as two different parts of one theoretical enterprise, as if they were two different strategies of thought to be freely adopted by the thinker. For this reason, it is of prime importance to return to the basic insight of the post-Schellingian “philosophy of the tragic”: A tragic problematization is not at the same level as an ethical (or philosophical) problematization, since it is by no means possible to articulate it with -or make it intelligible through- a theoretical discourse.

²⁰ Rosset (2000), p. 36.

²¹ Nietzsche’s following remarks in *The Birth of Tragedy* seems to be in accord with our distinction between ethical and tragic problematizations: “We need only consider the Socratic maxims: ‘Virtue is knowledge, all sins arise from ignorance, the virtuous man is the happy man.’ In these three basic optimistic formulae lies the death of tragedy. For now the virtuous hero must be dialectical, there must be a necessary, visible bond between virtue and knowledge, faith and morality; the transcendental justice of Aeschylus is reduced to the flat and impudent principle of ‘poetic justice’, with its usual *deus ex machina*” (Nietzsche (1993), p. 69).

“Objective” and “Subjective”

In our thesis, we will constantly refer to “objective” notions of error, “objective” and “subjective” aspects of action or the “subjectification” of error. Although the first chapter presents a systematic description of the notion of “objective error” in the context of ancient Greek tragedy, it is worth clarifying at the outset how we use these two general categories and what benefit we expect from them.

1. As our account of the Greek tragedies’ conception of objective error will illustrate, we use the term “objectivity” and the adjective “objective” to refer to those aspects of an action that are not immediately related with the conditions of an agent considered as its source. Accordingly, when an act will be considered under its “objective” aspects, it will be treated primarily as an “event” and only secondarily as an act with one our multiple sources. In this sense, when we refer to Greek tragedians’ objective error, we will refer to a paradigm where error is problematized primarily as an objective event and where the problematization of the agents of acts has a secondary, derivative position.

2. We use the general category “subjective” to refer to those aspects of actions that relate to the conditions and qualities of an agent who is to be held responsible for a given act. Accordingly, a “subject-centered” approach presupposes an identifiable and intelligible causal relation between an act and its source, and bases its ethical evaluation on the conditions of the agent. Therefore, when we refer to the “subject-centered” readings of the post-Renaissance literary critics, we will be referring to their tendency to focus on agents of acts and to derive the ethical implications of acts on this basis.²²

²² For further clarification about our use of the term “subjective” in the context of Augustine’s thought, see the “Preliminary Remarks” preceding our fourth chapter.

The distinction between subjective and objective notions of action will be of prime importance for our thesis, since it will constitute the basis of our enquiry on the notion of tragic error. As the reader will see in the first chapter, the category of “objectivity” will occupy a key position while describing the experience of error in Greek tragedies. Since we formulate our general notion of “tragic problematization” on the basis of this Greek model, the idea of objectivity will pervade the rest of our discussions on tragic error. In a sense, we will take the objectivity of the experience of error as one of the fundamental aspects of tragic experience as it is presented in Greek tragedies as well as in Racine’s or Shakespeare’s works.

Thesis Plan

Since Greek tragedy will constitute our point of departure for formulating the basic questions and terms of our inquiry, the first part of our thesis will center on it. In the opening chapter of the first part (i.e. Chapter II), we will present the main dynamics of the ethical universe of Greek tragedies and develop the notion of “objective error.” At this point, Soren Kierkegaard’s reflections on Greek and modern tragedy will constitute our main inspiration. The chapter will end with the consideration of the aftermath of Greek tragedy in Athens, with special focus on some aspects of Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophical projects. Our goal here will be to underline the anti-tragic aspect of their thoughts, without losing view of the continuities that their thoughts had with tragedies. In the second chapter of the first part (Chapter III), we will present the famous *hamartia*-passage of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and focus on the way the Renaissance and post-Renaissance critics have interpreted the passage. Our main goal here will be to show the

extent to which the Renaissance mind read tragedies in general and *Poetics* in particular through a “subject-centered” standpoint.

The second and central part of the thesis will be on Augustine. We will present Augustine’s thought under its two basic aspects that we find relevant for our discussion on tragic error and its “subject-centered” renderings. We will first concentrate on what we call the “subjective” aspects of Augustine’s philosophy and show how he introduced certain basic aspects of what will later become a “subject-centered” treatment of human action (Chapter IV). Following this, we will dwell on what we call the “objective” aspects of Augustine’s philosophy, with a view to comprehend the extent to which his thought goes beyond the limits of a “subject-centered” standpoint, especially in its treatment of human sin and fallibility (Chapter V).

In the last part (Chapter VI), we will revisit the Renaissance and post-Renaissance periods, but this time with the goal of understanding how new forms of tragic problematizations have been developed in the works of Shakespeare and Racine. Here, the two aspects of the Augustinian philosophy that we will have presented in the two preceding chapters will be our main references. Through this presentation, we hope to show that the consideration of Augustine’s thought sheds light on the invention and elaboration of new forms of tragic problematization -different from those that we find in Ancient Greece.

In our concluding chapter (Chapter VII), we will not only touch upon the main ideas and arguments presented throughout our project, but also ask whether the notion of “objective error” may be useful while dealing with certain complex cases of human error. Through our example of the Nazi commander Franz Stangl, we hope to pinpoint

the limits and disadvantages of an ethical problematization that puts exclusive emphasis on the “subjective” factors underlying errors. Even if we do not attempt to propose a systematic theory of “objective error,” we hope to convince the reader that such a term may be the keystone of an elaborate theory capable of dealing with various complex dimensions of the phenomenon of error.

PART I

THE PROBLEM OF ERROR IN GREEK TRAGEDY

CHAPTER II

OBJECTIVE ERROR AND GREEK TRAGEDY

Perplexity is surely among the prominent reactions that contemporary readers of Greek tragedies show when they witness Agamemnon's downfall, Ajax's devastating delusion or Oedipus' seemingly "innocent" patricide. Whatever our strategy to cope with it may be, the perplexity is there, forcing us to deal with human situations which seem to be, at least at first glance, strange for us and difficult to understand.

The aim of the present chapter is not to eliminate this fundamental perplexity by "solving" the alleged "riddle of tragic error." Our goal is rather to reach a better grasp of the reasons behind it by focusing on the way human error has been presented in ancient Greek tragedies. The main strategy that we will adopt is highly indebted to one particular theoretical attitude that developed during the twentieth century. This position, inspired by Louis Gernet's work on the history of juridical and moral notions in Ancient Greece,¹ is clearly observable in certain central texts of Jean-Pierre Vernant² and, following him, Suzanne Saïd.³ In the following parts, we hope to clarify the reason why this position more than any other should be followed and developed. For the time being, we will note that its major virtue is to develop a historical perspective which is also philosophically inspiring.

¹ Louis Gernet, *Recherches sur le développement de la pensée juridique et morale en Grèce*, Paris : A. Michel, 2001.

² Most notably in his articles entitled "Le moment historique de la tragédie en Grèce: quelques conditions sociales et psychologiques," "Tensions et ambiguïtés dans la tragédie grecque" and "Ebauches de la volonté dans la tragédie grecque" in Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001).

³ *La Faute tragique*, Paris : F. Maspero, 1979

The concept of “objective error,” developed especially in Suzanne Saïd’s work, will be the keystone of our terminology, since we believe that it has a great explanatory power despite all the difficulties that it brings about. In a sense, the main objective of the present chapter will be the theoretical elaboration of this notion in order to set out the basis of our future discussion on Augustine. Instead of starting with a somewhat “dogmatic” definition of the term, we will first attempt to convince the reader of its necessity for coming to terms with ancient Greek tragedy. To this end, we will dedicate the first section of this chapter to the presentation of our main problematic with reference to a well-known debate centered on Agamemnon’s error in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. In the next section, we will introduce the notion of “objective error” and we will attempt to delineate certain fundamental aspects of it with the intention of illuminating certain future phases of our project. In the third section, we will turn back to the problematic aspects of *Agamemnon* and try to shed a new light on them with the help of our central term. This discussion on the tragic conception of objective error will be followed by an overview of the philosophical attitude that appeared when the golden age of Greek tragedy came to a close.

The *Agamemnon* “Riddle”

Agamemnon, the first play of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy, is one of the most intriguing and puzzling works among the 37 extant Greek tragedies, mainly due to the complexity of its web of actions, as well as its difficult language rich in ambiguities. A large part of the scholarly debates that contribute to the interpretation of the play are centered on the main question, which is also posed in the context of other Greek tragedies: Why does the

protagonist go through a downfall in the end? In the context of Aeschylus' play, the question is as follows: Why did Agamemnon, the glorious commander of the victorious Greek armies, become the victim of the atrocious murder committed by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus? The question, which is quite simple in its form, becomes increasingly complex when one refrains from seeing "the blind machinery of fate" as the sole major dynamic of the play. We think that the reader is forced to embrace this complexity, given that the play itself resists any kind of fatalistic explanation and forces us to follow more intricate strategies in dealing with its ethical aspects. In effect, the enormous literature on the subject is there to show us the complications that the question involves. On the other hand, our main concern in this section will not be to favor one particular answer among the numerous ones that have been proposed, but rather to put forth certain aspects of this complex problem so as to delineate some elements of the debate around it.

One of the key scenes that scholars have constantly referred to in order to account for Agamemnon's downfall has been the famous episode at Aulis that is narrated by the chorus in the beginning parts of the play (lines 178-235). The opening scene (1-47) informs us that we are in Agamemnon's palace in Argos, where the return of the renowned commander is expected. Ten years have passed since the Greek armies that sacked Troy under Agamemnon's command won the war. The long choral part (48-295) that follows the opening scene reports the events that took place during the expedition to Troy, including the decisive episode at Aulis: Shortly after the expedition started, the chorus tells us, a storm raised by Artemis compelled the fleet to find shelter at the bay of Aulis. The goddess' cruel condition for calming the sea, as announced by

the prophet Calchas, introduces one of the leading elements of the tragedy: So that the sea is calmed and the expedition continues, Agamemnon has to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia for Artemis. After a monologue quoted by the chorus -and usually referred to as the “decision scene”- Agamemnon moves on to the sacrifice and saves the fleet from being trapped at Aulis. The crucial speech of Agamemnon frequently referred to by scholars goes as follows:

My fate is heavy either way:
heavy if I refuse to obey,
and heavy too if I kill my child,
pride of my house, staining these father’s
hands with streams of maiden blood
spilled at the altar. Which way is free
from evil? Can I desert my ships?
Fail all my allies? For in the eyes
of heaven, that they, with too eager passion,
should crave a sacrifice, even
of maiden blood, to still the winds,
is right. May it all be for the best. (235-247)

The most critical question concerning this passage relates to the basic problem, which we mentioned earlier, concerning the reasons of Agamemnon’s future death. The scholarly interest on the passage is completely legitimate, if one takes into account a succeeding passage of the play (lines 1413-1420) in which Clytemnestra tries to justify her crime against Agamemnon with reference to the atrocious murder of her daughter by the king. The question, raised with reference to the passage quoted above, is the following: Was Agamemnon guilty for the deed he did, i.e. for the murder of Iphigenia? Posed in those terms and with the aim of finding a consistent answer, this basic question and the myriad of other questions that it raises may be (and in fact have been) somehow related to the problem of personal freedom and ethical responsibility: Was Agamemnon free to choose between two options (i.e. between cancelling the expedition and saving

his daughter's life on the one hand, and following Artemis' precept on the other)? If so, has he been presented with two real alternatives (one more preferable than the other)? Did his situation involve a real choice? Or is it the case that no decision-taking is at stake and that Agamemnon is simply doomed to do what Artemis ordered him to? If so, is Agamemnon *destined* to die at the end of the chain of events that the expedition initiates? If this is the situation, what is the ethical significance of Agamemnon's being murdered by Clytemnestra? Is he not innocent, given that he moved on to his daughter's sacrifice through Artemis's compulsion?

Although there have been considerable attempts to defend Agamemnon's freedom and responsibility, as in the case of Bruno Snell,⁴ a large part of the scholars accepted an at least partial determination and discussed the reasons for it. Denys Page, to take one significant example, explicitly argued that Agamemnon had no choice but sacrificing his daughter, and that he is not to be held responsible for this act.⁵ For E. R. Dodds, on the other hand, Agamemnon's is a genuine choice situation that obviously leaves room for supposing that the hero is to some extent free. But in his case, arguing this does not amount to denying Zeus's authority over human sphere: Dodds rather argues that the two (i.e. man's freedom and Zeus's power) do not contradict since, as Paul Tillich says, "God's directing creativity always acts through the freedom of Man."⁶ In a sense, Dodds tries to get rid of any absolute conflict between human freedom and

⁴ Note that Snell's argument in Snell (1979), pp. 102-112, should be read on the basis of its Hegelian background. From such a perspective, Snell's argument is more complicated than a simple defense of the hero's freedom of choice. See Bollack & Judet de la Combe (1981), p. 325.

⁵ Page (1960), p. xxiii

⁶ Quoted by E. R. Dodds in Dodds (1960), p. 27, n.4. We think that Tillich may be criticized for explaining the world of the Greek tragedies with recourse to categories belonging to a monotheistic worldview.

divine determination by supposing an overlap between the ways in which human and divine spheres operate. Lloyd-Jones, on his part, agrees with Page about Agamemnon's lack of freedom and with Dodds about the hero's being guilty. For him, Agamemnon cannot be said to be free since no better alternative is presented to him: In either way he will be counted as guilty.⁷ Moreover, in the passage that follows Agamemnon's "decision," Zeus also takes away Agamemnon's power to judge by sending *atê*, i.e. momentary state of delusion that impedes any process of judgment. Nevertheless, Lloyd-Jones argues, this situation "does not absolve Agamemnon from the guilt his error will incur."⁸ This seemingly paradoxical situation is imaginable in Aeschylus' universe, since Agamemnon's guilt (in which, to repeat, the God-sent *atê* plays a significant role) is the outcome of Zeus' desire to destroy him: *By compelling him to be guilty, Zeus punishes Agamemnon for a past crime perpetrated by the hero's ancestors.* Lloyd-Jones refers to one of Aeschylus' extant fragments that support this idea: "Zeus makes a fault in men, when he is determined utterly to destroy a house."⁹

Both in Dodds and Lloyd-Jones, we observe the same endeavor to prevent any exclusive preference while explaining Agamemnon's guilt: Both, in their respective ways, try to reconcile the force of divine necessity and the freedom of human will.¹⁰ This reconciling move finds its most explicit formulation in Albin Lesky's famous "double-motivation theory" according to which Agamemnon, capable of acting through his own free will, goes through "a heavy inner conflict" at the end of which he begins to

⁷ Lloyd-Jones (1962), pp. 191-192.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 192.

⁹ Aeschylus, fragment 277, Loeb edition, pp. 15-16, quoted by Lloyd-Jones (1962), p. 192.

¹⁰ We will later argue that having recourse to those categories in the context of Ancient Greek culture poses serious problems.

desire the field of action that Necessity presents him.¹¹ Lesky supports his formulation by the apparently enigmatic passage of the Chorus, in which Agamemnon's moment of decision is described as "putting the necessity's yoke." For Lesky, the sentence is the perfect expression of the co-existence of the two (i.e. human and divine) motivations: On the one hand, Agamemnon is the active agent of the sentence since he "puts" the yoke. On the other, what he puts is the yoke of "Necessity," i.e. the binding divine force that determines the way he will act.¹² In a way, Agamemnon *actively* chooses to be an agent who is *passive* and subsumed to the blind rule of Fate.

We think that the double-motivation theory has the merit of attempting to comprehend the Aeschylus hero under a new light, by proposing a new theory of tragic action that would render the ethical world of Greek tragedy more accessible to the modern reader. However, we think that the main problem of Lesky's formulation is that it is grounded on the acceptance that Aeschylus's world lacks any logical consistency. For Lesky, the possibility of applying the double-motivation model to the Greek protagonists arises only if we accept the original (not to say the primitive) non-logical characteristic of Greek rationality in the fifth century B.C.¹³ This supposition may also be observed in other critics such as Dodds, whose approaches are in line with Lesky's, at least in their attempts to point at the overlap between human and divine spheres. More often than not, they refer to the fact that tragedies exemplify a "pre-logical" or "post-

¹¹ Lesky (1966), pp. 80-83.

¹² One should note that this argument is based on a particular translation of the line 248, which is far from being unanimously accepted among classicists. For a criticism of the translation, See Bollack & Judet de la Combe (1981), pp. 286-290.

¹³ For a critique of Lesky's position, see Nussbaum (1986), p. 26. Nussbaum classifies Lesky as a progressivist.

logical” mode of thinking that was developed in the absence of philosophical thinking.¹⁴ Emphasizing the radical originality of the rationality that has characterized the tragic universe may be enlightening from some respects, since it represents a pertinent move of historicization that would protect the reader from the perils of anachronism. But in doing that, Lesky and others did not question the absolute character of their paradigm which was shaped by the notions of freedom, will and determination unknown to the Greek world of the fifth century B.C.¹⁵ Since their claim about the “primitiveness” or “originality” of the Greek mind was grounded on the imposition of modern concepts on an ancient mindset, they could not escape a sort of anachronism and progressivism.

More recently, Martha C. Nussbaum challenged the Leskian position by criticizing its progressivist presumptions. In *Fragility of Goodness*, she argued that Agamemnon’s is a genuine choice-situation in which the hero is presented with two real alternatives. For Nussbaum, one of the alternatives (the sacrifice of Iphigenia) is obviously more preferable than the other, even though both seem to lead the hero to his downfall.¹⁶ Through a series of arguments, Nussbaum attempted to prove that Agamemnon’s situation can very well be comprehended as an example of ethical conflict and that he opts for the better choice. Accordingly, Agamemnon’s “guilt” does not arise as the outcome of the non-logical co-existence of human and divine causes, but as the outcome of a genuinely “human” error. The guilt does not relate to the content of Agamemnon’s decision, but rather to the way in which he *appropriates* his choice:

¹⁴ The terms can be found in Dodds (1960), p. 33. Vernant also makes a similar point in Vernant (1970), p. 289 and argues that tragedy is outside what he calls the “logic of identity and of the excluded middle” that has been developed after Parmenides.

¹⁵ On the impertinence of using such a paradigm in interpreting Greek tragedies, see especially Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), Chapter III.

¹⁶ Nussbaum (1986), pp. 34-35.

Instead of lamenting for the horrible state of affairs that awaits him, Agamemnon changes his attitude vis-à-vis his sorrowful choice and acts as if he is willing to commit this crime.

There is no doubt that Nussbaum's attempt to criticize the progressivist standpoint is praiseworthy. Yet, we think that the strategy she pursues to this end also leads to a serious problem of anachronism. Instead of proposing a historical standpoint for questioning the basic terminology of the progressivist position, Nussbaum prefers to follow the opposite strategy and chooses to completely abandon a historical outlook. Indeed, this choice of strategy is not a mere matter of methodology, but is intrinsically related with Nussbaum's overall project: Her critique of the progressivist attitude lays emphasis on the proximity between modern and ancient conceptions of human action. In other words, her reading of *Agamemnon* is considerably shaped by the insight that the world of Aeschylus is not as distant from ours as the progressivists regard it to be. The situation of Agamemnon in Aulis, as well as the consequences of his actions, can very well be understood with recourse to a somewhat refined version of the present ethical paradigm. By focusing on the main dynamics of the scene at Aulis, modern ethical paradigm can gain new perspectives. It is therefore of great benefit to analyze the scene from a contemporary standpoint.

We are ready to pursue Nussbaum's initial goal and to benefit from the ancient conception of action in order to enrich and broaden our present ethical paradigm. However, we think that she goes too far in her effort to understand the world of Greek tragedy through modern eyeglasses. In fact, we think that her reading leads her to find in Aeschylus' play some elements that are actually not there: For one thing, we think (and

we will try to show in the following paragraphs) that it is misleading to take Agamemnon's experience at Aulis as a genuine personal choice situation whose ethical significance can be grasped in modern terms. Besides, this reading pushes Nussbaum to completely omit the influence of the external factor of divine *atê* on the change of Agamemnon's attitude. It is difficult to understand how Nussbaum does not face the question of divine intervention in interpreting this critical moment, upon which she constructs her argument on Agamemnon's ethical error.

The interpretations that we have presented, despite the diversity of their starting-points, strategies and conclusions, seem to have one aspect in common: They are shaped by the terminology of "freedom vs. necessity" paradigm. Most of the writers that we mentioned and a lot of others that followed them gave precedence to the categories of freedom, free choice, human will and determination in order to comprehend the basic ethical problematic of the play. However, we think that this choice of terminology leads the interpreter to simplify the highly complex phenomenon of error that is presented by the Aeschylean universe. Throughout this paradigm, the ethical dimension of the tragic action is eventually formulated on the basis of a simple "either-or" duality: A person is *either* free (and for that matter ethically responsible) *or* under compulsion (and for that matter ethically excusable). *Either* Agamemnon faces a real choice situation and chooses freely, *or* he is determined by the divine decisions. He is *either* guilty, *or* innocent. It is true, in fact, that in most of the cases that we presented (such as the double-motivation theory) the critics come about with complex formulations that save the reader from being forced to accept one alternative. But there too, we might argue, the same bipolarity

determines the way the problem is posed and leads the interpreter to describe the situation as inconsistent. The main argument is as follows: Since Greek tragedy presents us with a person who is blamed for an act that he/she has committed “without willing it,” it is ruled by a non-logical rationality.

In the case of Agamemnon, one of the outcomes of this “either/or” principle has been to overestimate the importance of finding out whether Agamemnon’s is a genuine choice situation. Dodds, Lesky and finally Nussbaum consider this to be a critical issue, since they think that the ethical significance of the scene (and consequently that of the play) depends on it: If no choice is at stake in the episode at Aulis, then Agamemnon is merely a puppet subordinated to the caprices of divine powers; hence, his chain of actions is devoid of any tragic sense.

At this point, we would like to follow the interpretation presented by Jean Bollack and Pierre Judet de La Combe. Bollack and Judet de la Combe refuse to find any real choice situation in the episode, but they do not see this as a reason for underestimating the importance of the scene for the overall “tragic” sense of the play. Following them, we would like to argue that the episode does not present a situation of genuine personal choice or ethical dilemma, and that this fact does not reduce its importance. First (and Nussbaum would partially agree with us on this point), Agamemnon’s alleged “deliberation speech” does not provide us with enough evidence to convince us that he tries to choose between two equally powerful, real options. It is true that he mentions both possibilities, but he seems to be aware of the fact that they are, so to speak, incommensurable. What is at stake is not a clash between two duties,¹⁷

¹⁷ Bollack & Judet de la Combe (1981), p. 283.

but rather the recognition of the difficulty of following *the* duty of continuing the expedition as Zeus ordered. And this is perfectly in line with Agamemnon's social position, since his role as a commander is a compelling factor in shaping his field of action.¹⁸

The second reason concerns the theology of the play: It is hard to imagine that Agamemnon can even consider ignoring Artemis's command, since this would lead to the denial of the authority of Zeus, as well as of his order that constitutes the basis of the expedition. It is true that one can imagine a situation in which Agamemnon finds himself in a state of *hubris*¹⁹ and blinds himself to the point of ignoring Zeus's authority. In fact, this would not be utterly irrelevant to the world of Greek tragedies where *hubris* is central to most of the tragic plots. However, contrary to Ajax's or Oedipus's *hubris*, which are hard to isolate from the value-system of military life, this one would correspond to the value-system of a gracious father, a figure that would belong to the nineteenth century drama rather than to Greek tragedy. Moreover, the denial of Artemis' and Zeus' commands would also lead to a clash between the two gods, which is highly improbable given the dominant dynamics of the play.²⁰

¹⁸ While saying this, we once again refer to Bollack & Judet de la Combe (1981), pp. 280-282. Martha Nussbaum makes a similar point while showing that Agamemnon chooses the obviously better option; but she refers to a more, so to speak, "rational" preference: Since the other alternative would lead Agamemnon, Iphigenia and the whole army into death, sacrificing the daughter and continuing the expedition is considerably more preferable (Nussbaum (1986), p. 34). Instead of thinking that there is rational ground for killing Iphigenia, we prefer to think that it is in a way the necessary consequence of Agamemnon's social position and gods' expectations from him.

¹⁹ We think that the usual English translation of *hubris* as "pride" has the risk of putting too much emphasis on the internal, psychological conditions of the agent as in the case of the Augustinian notion of *superbia* (see Chapter V of the present thesis). *Hubris*, however, has a more "objective" connotation in the sense that it depicts a situation in which an agent, ignorant of the limits set for human beings by gods, acts in an improper manner. For this reason, the French translation of *hubris* as "*démesure*" captures the sense of the term in a better way.

²⁰ Bollack & Judet de la Combe (1981), p. 164. Bollack argues that in *Agamemnon*, Artemis is "subjected to the decision of the sovereign and just god" (my translation).

On the basis of our refusal to see in the episode at Aulis any genuine deliberation and choice, we may seem to accept that Agamemnon is subjected to divine laws and that he is, for that matter, innocent. In fact, if we stayed within the “freedom vs. determinism” paradigm, this would be the expected conclusion of our argument (and it is that of Page for example). Among the critics that we have mentioned, Lloyd-Jones went further than Page, Dodds and Lesky in trying to prevent the bipolarity that this paradigm would lead: He accepted the possibility of conceiving Agamemnon *both* as not free *and* guilty. His explanation is inspiring insofar as it leads us to conceive the protagonist’s act as a genuine error, which is *at the same time* a product of divine intervention. But once again, his loyalty to the spirit of “freedom vs. determinism” terminology prevents him from enlarging his enterprise and finding a new way to associate the lack of freedom with guilt. For this reason, his argument runs the risk of being conceived as a purely deterministic interpretation.²¹ Although we think that Lloyd-Jones’s position is more complex than that, we still think that one can find legitimate grounds to support a charge of determinism. Lloyd-Jones’s primary concern is not to enlighten the original conception of human guilt that is present in Greek tragedies, but rather to show how Agamemnon’s guilt can be regarded as a part of the larger mechanism of fate. To this end, he refers to the curse that haunts Agamemnon’s house and explains the hero’s downfall with reference to the crime of his father. Hence, the fact that Agamemnon is *both* not free *and* guilty is ultimately explained with reference to Zeus’s determining power. For Lloyd-Jones, the “riddle” concerning Agamemnon is solved with recourse to the superhuman factor in his acts.

²¹ In fact, Hammond (1965) presents such a misreading that Martha Nussbaum rightly criticizes in Nussbaum (1986), p. 34, n.29.

Is it possible to refuse to see any genuine choice situation in the episode at Aulis without degrading Agamemnon to a puppet of the destiny and the scene to an act of melodrama? We think that this turn necessitates the abandonment of the “freedom vs. determinism” paradigm that severely marked the interpretations that we mentioned above. To this end, we will propose to approach the ancient tragic conception of human error from a different perspective. We think that the notion of “objective error” can be a helpful starting-point in building such a perspective.

The Notion of “Objective Error”

A First Approximation: Kierkegaard and the Aesthetic Error

It seems appropriate to begin our description of the conception of error in ancient Greek tragedy with reference to one of Kierkegaard’s early articles on the subject, which we find highly inspiring and illuminating for clarifying the principal terms of our discussion. The article, entitled “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama”²² is, for the most part, centered on a comparison between ancient and modern conceptions of tragedy, with a particular emphasis on the notions of error adopted by these two positions.

In order to have a grasp of the basic Kierkegaardian insight, which we find highly illuminating for our research, we will focus on one of the initial formulations in

²² Kierkegaard (1987), pp. 137-161. Although it is not central for our subject, a note on the authorship of the essay is obligatory for the one who would like to show some respect to Kierkegaard’s preference for using pseudonyms. Kierkegaard, as in many of his philosophical works, published the book under a pseudonym, that of “Victor Eremita.” Moreover, the two major parts of the book are supposed to include the articles of two different imaginary writers, A and B. The article that we will refer to is taken from the first part written by A, and there are good reasons to think that this part mostly reflects ideas that Kierkegaard will try to refute during his entire career. Nevertheless, for the sake of brevity, and assuming that it would not influence the content of our argument, we will refer to these ideas as if they belong to Kierkegaard.

the article pertaining to the idea of human action in Greek tragedies. The passage is as follows:

The peculiarity of ancient tragedy is that the action does not proceed from character alone, that *the action is not reflected enough in the acting subject*, but that *it has a relative admixture of passion*.²³

The clarification of the two clauses that we italicized may be rewarding in getting the real significance of Kierkegaard's text from our standpoint.

The first clause, "the action is not reflected enough in the acting subject," concerns the way an agent relates to his/her action. Accordingly, the experience of action in Greek tragedy does not gain its significance through the reflections of an agent who conceives and problematizes himself/herself as the author of it. The clause is better understood when one considers another remark that Kierkegaard makes a few lines beneath: "the action is as much *event* as action." The action, in other words, even when it unambiguously belongs to a particular agent, is considered in terms of its *material* and *objective* aspects, and not in terms of how it is experienced and evaluated by the agent. One would even rightly say that, more than belonging to the agent, the action belongs to the overall state of affairs that encircles the agent, i.e. to the realm of events.

The second clause extracted from the passage, "[the action] has a relative admixture of passion," can be understood under the light shed by the first one: Insofar as an action is not conceived as belonging to a given agent who perceives himself/herself

²³ Kierkegaard (1987), p. 142 (my emphasis). We made a slight modification in the English translation of the last clause, thinking that this version is more loyal to Kierkegaard's argument. Instead of translating "*liden*" by "suffering," we preferred "passion" that would directly refer to the agent's state of passivity and emphasize the paradoxical nature of Kierkegaard's formulation. A similar preference can be found in the French translation of the text (*L'alternative*, trans. Paul-Henri Tisseau, Paris: Editions de l'Orange, 1970), where "*pâtir*" is used to translate "*liden*," in such a way that the contrast between "*agir*" and "*pâtir*" (similar to the contrast between "action" and "passion") is maintained and emphasized. We would like to thank Türker Armaner for his valuable recommendations based on the original Danish version of the text.

as its author, it is also something that *happens* to the agent. To the extent that the action is an event, it has an objective status that is to be evaluated without any primary reference to its source. In such a case, the ethical quality of the act cannot be explained with reference to the agent's degree of participation in an event. Indeed, it is generally difficult to distinguish between the active participation and the passive subordination of the agent to the event in question.

These two formulae are crucial for getting the gist of Kierkegaard's argument on tragic error and guilt. In another passage concerning the Aristotelian notion of error [*hamartia*], Kierkegaard makes the following remark: "But just as the action in Greek tragedy is something intermediate between activity and passivity, so too is the guilt, and in this lies the tragic collision."²⁴ The fundamental characteristic of the Greek experience of error and guilt is that the individual finds himself in an ambiguous situation: He is not only the author of the error, but also its victim.

However abstract and enigmatic these formulae may seem, the basic insight underlying them is highly revealing for us. What Kierkegaard's text enables us, in the very least, is to find a way to come to terms with the complex nature of the Greek experience of error. It anticipates a possible theoretical attitude that may conceive the problem of human error and guilt without being trapped by a series of binary oppositions such as freedom and determinism, guilt and innocence... If we can imagine the Greek hero to be *simultaneously* active and passive, we can come out with a fundamental change in our basic approach: instead of seeing tragic guilt as a riddle to be solved, we

²⁴ Kierkegaard (1987), p. 143

can conceive it as a complex phenomenon that makes us face to face with a deep contradiction.

Besides this general inspirational characteristic of Kierkegaard's article, one could also point at a more particular virtue of it. We think that the way Kierkegaard distinguishes between Greek and modern notions of guilt is worthy of consideration. For Kierkegaard, the ancient Greeks' experience of guilt may be labeled as "aesthetic," while its modern counterpart will take the adjective "ethical." Without entering into the details of the respective significations of the terms "aesthetic" and "ethical" for Kierkegaard's overall project, we would like to point at the significance of this preference. The term "aesthetic" can be understood to refer to the "non-subjective" character of the guilt, since the term emphasizes the externally observable aspects of an action, instead of describing it as an experience belonging to the inner life of an agent. In this sense, we think that the term "aesthetic guilt" is more or less in line with the term "objective guilt," which we will introduce in the following pages.

The import of the use of the adjective "ethical" is even deeper, when our project is thought in its entirety. For Kierkegaard, when guilt ceases to be treated as an objective event and begins to belong to the sphere of human subjectivity, it also becomes a component of the sphere of ethical evaluation. When guilt is understood as a subjective category, one is inclined to consider the agent as "accountable for everything" and for that matter "unequivocally guilty."²⁵ Hence, Kierkegaard seems to suggest that the process through which guilt becomes subjective implies a parallel process of moralization, since "subjective guilt" can only be evaluated in moral terms.

²⁵ For these two formulae, see respectively p. 144 and p. 147 in Kierkegaard (1987).

To deepen and broaden the implications of Kierkegaard's insight, we would like to have a glance at a passage from Max Scheler's work, which seems to follow the spirit of Kierkegaard's article and add a new component to it. In his essay "On the Tragic," Scheler makes the following remark:

In general, [...] the quality of the tragic is lacking when the question "Who is guilty?" has a clear and definite answer. [...] The tragic consists -at least in human tragedies- not simply in the absence of "guilt," but rather in the fact that the guiltiness cannot be localized.²⁶

It seems safe to think that, when Scheler refers to the indeterminacy of the answer to the question "Who is guilty?", what he has in mind is essentially the Kierkegaardian notion of aesthetic guilt. But Scheler does not stay satisfied by pointing at the *ambiguity* of the relation between the agent and the guilt, but he goes one step further to indicate the ultimate *impossibility to localize* the guilt. This point will be worth taking into account, since such kind of resistance to being localized will be the pivotal characteristic of the notion of "objective error" that we will present in the subsequent pages.

Objective Error

The term "objective crime," from which our central concept of "objective error" has derived, has been introduced to the study of Greek conception of human action by Louis Gernet. His work has been highly influential on the two writers that we will refer to in the following pages, namely Jean-Pierre Vernant and Suzanne Saïd. A glance at their work will reveal the fact that this concept may be extremely useful while reflecting on the Greek notion of human error.

²⁶ Scheler (1952), p. 116. For the English translation, see Max Scheler, "On The Tragic" in Corrigan (1965), p. 13 (my emphasis).

As in the case of Kierkegaard's "aesthetic guilt," the notion of "objective crime" [*délit objectif*] refers to a situation in which the agent is not seen as the "subject" of a given action. Hardly detachable from the ideas of pollution [*miasma*] and collective responsibility, the notion of objective crime forces one to conceive a given act in terms of its material existence (i.e. its direct and indirect consequences, its perceptible characteristics and so on), instead of its relation with a particular agent. A clear example of this material conception of action can be found in the history of the term *miasma*, which, in its early uses (e.g. in Homer), refers to a concrete physical stain that should be avoided during or cleaned before the ritual.²⁷ Although the physical signification of *miasma* disappears gradually, the idea of materiality persists in the future uses of the term: When a crime is committed, it gains, so to speak, an independent and objective existence that goes beyond its author's field of action, and it has a considerable effect on the subsequent chain of events.

In a significant way, Gernet's analysis of objective crime goes hand in hand with a historical survey of the transformation of the notion of error, and especially of the verb *hamartanein* together with its cognate words.²⁸ *Hamartanein*, in line with *miasma*, has mostly a physical connotation in Homer and usually means "to miss the mark" in a given situation, mostly during a battle. But even in this preliminary stage, its use in combination with other terms like *êpos* ("word" or "thought") gives rise to more abstract

²⁷ Adkins (1960), p. 86. For a more detailed survey of the term's usage and evolution, see also Parker (1983) and Moulinier (1952). The term also occupies a central position in Ricœur's theory of human culpability in Ricœur (1988).

²⁸ The main focus of linguists is generally on the verb *hamartanein* and not on the well-known term *hamartia* that Aristotle uses in Ch. 13 of *Poetics*. As a matter of fact, the continuity in the different uses of the verb can be easily observed from Homer to tragic poets. The same is not the case for *hamartia*, which does not appear in the texts preceding tragedies. See the table in Saïd (1978), p. 44.

connotations that designate mistakes done by “missing” the right word or idea.²⁹ After Homer, this metaphorical use fades without completely disappearing, and a more abstract use of the verb *hamartanein* becomes prevalent in denoting “error” in the general sense. But one should note that this abstract use is rarely based on a clear distinction between intellectual and moral significances of an act.³⁰ And this ambiguity will persist and even become central for tragedies.

Significantly enough, *hamartanein* and its cognates will generally be used in contexts in which the missing of the mark or the error in general is related with the idea of *atê* (usually translated as “madness,” “disaster” or even “fault”), a power which acts on agents and leads them into a state of distraction and blindness.³¹ When considered in terms of its relation with *atê*, then, *hamartanein* cannot be regarded solely as a term referring to an exclusively human experience.³² In most cases, it would be possible to treat human error described by the verb *hamartanein* as something that *happens* to the agent, usually due to the intervention of an external force. This force frequently takes the form of *atê*, whose source is mostly ambiguous³³ and generally external to the agent. In this sense, it would not be wrong to say that the terms belonging to the *hamartanein* family, before the fifth century, refer mainly to something that comes from outside, seizes the agent and leads him to distraction.³⁴

²⁹ Saïd (1978), p. 50.

³⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 54-58.

³¹ Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), p. 55.

³² For our remarks on the relation between the notions of *atê* and *hamartia*, see Chapter II.

³³ The example that Saïd gives from Homer is illuminating in this respect. See *Illiad* 19.87-88.

³⁴ Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), p. 55 and Vernant (1970), p. 285.

All these, pushed to their logical consequence, may amount to saying that the notion of objective error implies the complete elimination of human guilt, and that the dominance of external forces leaves no room for responsibility. However, accepting this conclusion would lead us to neglect the complexity of the term: The term “objective crime” implies both the ethical neutrality of an event and a whole series of legal and ethical connotations imposed by the term “crime.” To overlook one of these two components would in fact nullify the concept. For this reason, it would be utterly misleading to think that objective error refers to a situation in which human beings conceive themselves as mere puppets of divine forces. In fact, such a formulation would send us back into the freedom vs. determinism paradigm, which we try to escape in order to see the tragic action under a new light. The notion of objective error does not entail the complete absence of any notion of guilt but rather the existence of a different version of it, which is difficult to grasp on the basis of our existing juridical-ethical presuppositions and concepts. This particular notion of guilt is based on a pattern of action that would perfectly fit with Kierkegaard’s formulation: From the standpoint of the agent, an objective error is an *action* that has an admixture of *passion*. To repeat Vernant’s words, the action as a whole has a relative independence from the agent, in the sense that it is an extra-human element that captures him/her.³⁵ In other words, the action gains its full significance only when it is “detached from man and inserted into a

³⁵ Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), p. 56. A few pages later, in the same article, we find the echo of Kierkegaard’s formula: “Since the origin of the action lies both in man himself and outside him, the same character appears now as an agent, the cause and source of his actions, and now as acted upon, engulfed in a force that is beyond him and sweeps him away.” See Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), p. 68 (For the English translation, see Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1991), p. 77). Elsewhere, Vernant presents a clear formulation of the independence of the act in the context of Greek heroic legend: “The source and origin of the action are not to be found in the hero, but outside of him. It is not because he is a hero that he did the impossible, but the reverse.” See Vernant (2006), p. 90 (my translation).

religious, cosmic order which transcends man,”³⁶ i.e. only when it is understood as an objective phenomenon.

In such a context, human beings take responsibilities, commit crimes and are found guilty. Nevertheless, they conceive what they do less as actions that emanate directly and exclusively from themselves than as events that are “over there.” Consequently, no inconsistency or tension arises between an action’s being objectively “over there” and its being attributed to a particular agent. The idea that an action has a non-personal aspect does not lead Greek agents into a fatalistic view of the universe, since they do not conceive such a situation as the abolition of an allegedly *free* faculty of acting by an *over-determining* power. Were that be the case, there would be no place in ancient Greek epic or tragedy for scenes in which the agent discusses the extent to which he is responsible [*aitios*] for a given state of affairs. Indeed, one can find such scenes even in Homer, where the web of action is weaved with the interventions of super-human powers. What is decisive in those scenes, however, is that the hero does not see divine intervention as an excuse for any given error.³⁷ On this basis, one can safely argue that the social and ethical significance of an action is not related primarily to the degree in which the agent takes part in it. The ethical dimensions of an act are discussed on the basis of its observable results, i.e. its objective character.³⁸ In such a context, then, it is possible to refer to a particular notion of guilt, which considers the situation of an agent without isolating him/her from the objective consequences of a given act. From this perspective, what is absent here is not the notion of guilt, but the moral and juridical use

³⁶ Vernant (1970), p. 286. For a similar point, see also Vernant (2006), p. 90.

³⁷ Vickers rightly suggests this point as evidence for the fact that the Greek universe was far from being fatalistic. See Vickers (1973), p. 133.

³⁸ Saïd (1978), p. 57 and pp. 148-152.

of categories pertaining to the degree of responsibility of the agent. The ethical condition of the agent is not evaluated primarily on the basis of his contribution to the act. The objective quality of the act has a more central signification.

At this point, a glimpse at the historical transformation of the notion of objective error may be highly rewarding. In effect, for reasons that we will consider, the Archaic (eight-sixth centuries B.C.) instantiations of the idea of objective error cannot prove sufficient to cover the tragic experience of *hamartia*. Getting the real sense of “the historical moment of Greek tragedy” (to refer to one of Vernant’s illuminating articles) necessitates the comprehension of the particularity of the categories of action during the Classical age, i.e. the period that witnessed the rise and fall of tragedy as a form. A broad historical survey shows that with the Dracon laws (642 B.C.), new juridical categories pertaining to the person’s degree of contribution to the act began to be operative and to challenge the idea of objectivity of error.³⁹ The idea of the collective responsibility of the family, already criticized by Theognis,⁴⁰ has been replaced by a more personal conception of crime that revolved around the categories of *hekon* (willingly) and *akon* (without willing). This enabled the juridical discernment between murders that are premeditated [*phonos hekousios*] and those that are not [*phonos akousios*].⁴¹

The crucial point for our subject is that the transformation in the main categories and presuppositions of the juridical sphere did not lead to a complete abandonment of

³⁹ However, one should not forget that the use of these categories is not accompanied by a rigorous philosophical reflection on their nature. Hence, their use was far from being devoid of ambiguity. See Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), p. 54.

⁴⁰ Saïd (1978), p. 150.

⁴¹ Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), p. 56.

traditional conceptions of action in social and religious life. When the golden age of tragedies (i.e. the fifth century B.C.) began, the popular belief in notions like *miasma* and *atê* was still among the key components of daily experiences of Athenian citizens. The ambiguity that arose out of the coexistence of those two sets of values, civic and legal on the one hand, and religious on the other, has been the central element of the “historical moment” of tragedy.⁴² The tragic world was different from that of Homer in the sense that the objectivity of crime was not an unquestioned element of the sphere of values, but a prominent ethical problematic. The material offered by mythical and heroic traditions has been situated within the universe of the city-state and reconsidered under the light of new political and juridical values. This gave birth to what Vernant called the “border zone in which human acts are articulated with divine powers”⁴³ and where ambiguities and paradoxes of the human action shaped the tragic imagery.

To comprehend the tragic action, then, it seems fruitful to take the notion of objective error as a major paradigmatic element and to concentrate on the ways in which it was discussed, problematized, challenged and reshaped by the relatively new sphere of values observable in tragedies. For this reason, it is highly important to discuss the notion of objective error with reference to the particular context in which it operated during the fifth century B.C. Hence, we think that it would be illuminating to consider *Agamemnon* under the light shed by this particular notion, in order that we discover the prominent aspects of the experience of error in Greek tragedies.

⁴² Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Le moment historique de la tragédie en Grèce: quelques conditions sociales et psychologiques” in Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), pp. 13-17.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 16.

Agamemnon Revisited: Paradoxes of Human Error

In the first part of this chapter, we tried to show how a great deal of attempts to clarify the ethical aspects of *Agamemnon* (and especially of the critical episode at Aulis) have reached misleading conclusions due to the freedom vs. determination paradigm. Here, we will propose a more proper way to cope with the problem of error in the play by having recourse to the notion of objectivity which we introduced previously. And while doing this, we will not attempt to offer a new and more satisfactory “solution” to what we have called the “Agamemnon riddle.” Instead of this, we will try to face and explore the extremely complex nature of Agamemnon’s situation, since we think that the notion of objective error -at least in its Aeschylean form- imposes such an understanding.

On the basis of the framework that we presented in the previous part, it now seems possible to emphasize two main characteristics of objective error, which will be exemplified by the episode at Aulis and by many other parts of the *Oresteia* trilogy:

(i) the nature of an objective error cannot be properly understood by supposing that a definite causal relation between an agent and an act actually exists,

(ii) the ethical or juridical evaluation of an objective error cannot be made with reference to the intentions and motives that the agent has while doing the act. Such an evaluation is rather based on the concrete effects that the act has on the existing state of affairs.

These two complementary characteristics are in fact two aspects of the same phenomenon: The first one poses the fundamental ontological aspects of a given act by focusing on its source, while the second one refers to the ethical and juridical repercussions of such ontology. The first principle reminds us of Scheler’s motto

according to which “guilt is not localizable” and invites us to conceive an objective act primarily as an “event.” The second principle determines the ethical status of such an event by putting the emphasis on the observable aspects of it, i.e. the objective qualities of the action.

A reconsideration of the episode at Aulis under the light shed by these two principles changes the meaning of the scene significantly. Once the notion of objective error is taken into account, the question whether Agamemnon’s situation includes a genuine act of choice loses its critical characteristic. What matters for the central dynamic of the play is the “event” that took place in Aulis: Agamemnon ordered the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia. From the point of view of objective error, this event itself is enough to explain Clytemnestra’s anger that will culminate in Agamemnon’s murder. In fact, during the entire play, the act itself is characterized as impious, sacrilegious and contrary to all laws,⁴⁴ without taking into account whether Agamemnon did it by himself or under Artemis’ and Zeus’ compulsion. What this means is that the ethical implications of the play do not depend primarily on the solution of the Agamemnon “riddle,” which concerns the role that the hero played in the crime. Even if we refuse to solve the riddle, the significance of the Aulis episode stays intact: It shows us a man -whose field of action is to some extent shaped by powers that override him- committing a terrible crime.

This event, in its objectivity, regardless of the degree of Agamemnon’s contribution to it, can very well be considered as *the* central factor that lies behind

⁴⁴ *Agamemnon*, lines 150 and 219-220. See also Saïd (1978), p. 159.

Clytemnestra's approaching murder, hence as one of the most important turning-points in the play. But tragedy gains its meaning only when the event is perceived and evaluated from the point of view of the human being who contributes to it. In this sense, the scene does not only present us an event, but also the *attitude* of a particular agent who experiences it. Hence, the energy and the movement that is observed in Agamemnon's monologue should not be seen as a series of rhetorical ornaments aiming to poeticize a simple tale of preordained downfall. The ambiguities that precede Agamemnon's final declaration are of key importance for the multi-faceted tragic universe that we witness: Agamemnon, faced with the difficult requirement posed by Artemis, first considers the devastating situation in which he finds himself, the fact that he cannot escape from the destruction caused by fate. In the beginning of his speech, his attitude seems to be based on the possibility of choosing between two options. But as he moves along, he seems to face the incomparability of the two paths, and at the end he accepts that the only option to choose (and to choose whole-heartedly) is the sacrifice of his daughter. It seems legitimate to think that the universe surrounding Agamemnon and the whole theology that it implies prevent us from defining the hero as an "agent free to make decisions." In spite of that, the acts of Agamemnon, with all their ambiguities, still make sense in terms of their exclusively human aspects. In other words, what we have here is not a man whose actions (as well as the events related to those actions) are the *direct* enactments of the divine fate. The organization of the text, as well as the theology underlying it, enables the reader to distinguish Agamemnon's actions from those of divine powers.

However, if we go *too far* in this abstraction, i.e. if we aspire to draw separate maps showing the chains of actions of human and divine agents, we run the risk of ruining the tragic sense of the play. Mapping out the complex relations of causality between gods and human beings without leaving room to ambiguity would lead us to taking distance from the tragic world where, to remind Scheler's motto, "guilt is not localizable." The tragic "event" takes place in the "border zone [*la zone frontière*]" that Vernant refers to, i.e. in this area in which human acts are "hinged together with [*viennent s'articuler avec*]" (and are not merely subordinated to) divine acts.⁴⁵ The murder of Iphigenia, which is the main event that triggers Clytemnestra's revenge, takes place in a sphere of action where both divine and human forces are at play. The two forces work together, without for that matter becoming one and the same.⁴⁶ The connection between these two spheres of action can best be understood as an ambiguous relation that gives the tragic conception of action its paradoxical quality.

On the basis of these evaluations, we can return back to the two fundamental characteristics of the objective error and reconsider them in the context of *Agamemnon*:

(i) It would be disorienting to conceive the relationship between Agamemnon and divine powers (primarily Artemis and Zeus) as an unambiguous and unproblematic relation of causality. The event that takes place in the scene is formed with the somewhat unclear complicity between human and divine spheres: There is the fact that the sacrifice of Iphigenia, which will be avenged by Clytemnestra, is ordered by Agamemnon. But both Zeus (who ordered the expedition) and Artemis (who imposed on

⁴⁵ Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), p. 39. For the English translation, see Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1990), p. 47.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 68.

Agamemnon the deadly decision) contributed to it. If we considered the action as Agamemnon's own, we would fall in opposition with the spirit of the text and omit the contributions of divine powers. If, on the other hand, we attribute the event solely to divine forces, then Agamemnon's speech, together with all that it tells us about the hero's position (e.g. the attitude he adopts when he accepts the sacrifice wholeheartedly), would lose its significance.⁴⁷ The scene, in other words, would become an instance of divine punishment and it would contain no human dimension.

(ii) On the basis of the juridical and ethical aspects of the plot, what counts primarily is the "event" itself, and not the relationship between the two spheres. Neither Clytemnestra's, nor the chorus' evaluations of the event are based on the status of the hero as an agent committing the act. What principally matters is the observable result that the scene produces.

The episode at Aulis is not the only part of the *Oresteia* trilogy in which it is possible to observe the problematic and ambiguous complicity between gods and human beings. In fact, all three murders that constitute the major turning-points of the trilogy (i.e. Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon and Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra) are marked by such complicity. Moreover, Clytemnestra's and Orestes' cases are clearer instances of objective crime, since the complicity between gods and human beings, together with its ethical implications, is to some extent discussed and problematized. But this problematization, as we shall see, does not lead to the abandonment of the notion of objective error.

⁴⁷ For this point, see Saïd (1978), pp. 163-164.

The passage following Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon (1372-1577) is typical in this respect, since it brings both human murder and inherited divine curse into question. To begin with, Clytemnestra's words state the all-too-human motives behind this premeditated crime: She wanted to take revenge for Iphigenia's death (1412-1420) and to punish a husband who has "abused his wife," who has been "seduced by every captive girl at Ilion" and who brought his concubine Cassandra to his homeland (1437-1440). On the other hand, Clytemnestra explicitly refers to the divine powers that interfered in the chain of events: She swears in the name of *Dikê* (Justice), *Atê*, and *Erinyes* who are, for her, the avengers of her child (1432-1434). In a further passage, she goes as far as claiming that the act in question was not carried out by her:

Are you saying this work is mine? That's not so.
Don't think of me as Agamemnon's wife.
The form of this corpse's wife was taken on
by the ancient savage spirit of revenge [*Alastor*]. (1498-1501)

The Chorus, in its reply to Clytemnestra, contributes to this bi-dimensional account of the facts: While it acknowledges Clytemnestra's responsibility and announces the proper punishments that would suit her case (1410), it also refers to the "spirit that falls upon the house" (1466) or the "huge fiend haunting [the] house" (1481). And when Clytemnestra, in the above-presented passage, refers to the responsibility of *Alastor* in the crime, the Chorus does not hesitate to put forth a more precise account of the complicity between human and divine forces:

Who would ever say
you bear no guilt
for Agamemnon's murder?
How could they? How?
Yet that avenging spirit
acting on his father's crime
could well have egged you on. (1505-1510)

This is how the objectivity of the crime is problematized: In response to Clytemnestra's explanation that would spare her from all responsibility, the Chorus moves on to a more detailed explanation and claims that *Alastor* is a supportive force and not the only responsible agent for the crime. On one hand, we find here the endeavor to delineate the roles of human and divine forces in the realization of an act; on the other, this effort does not have any central ethical-juridical implication for the play. What counts is the mere event that Clytemnestra murdered her husband.

The complexity of the relationship between gods and human beings become all the more visible in the case of Orestes, whose revengeful act in the second play of the trilogy (*Libation Bearers*) becomes a subject of juridical debate in the third play (*Eumenides*). The contribution of Apollo to Orestes' matricide is a recurrent theme in both plays and it is discussed in clear terms. To begin with, in *Libation Bearers*, Orestes explicitly claims that the act of murder that he envisages is ordered by Apollo:

[269] Surely he will not abandon me, the mighty oracle of Loxias [i.e. Apollo], who urged me to brave this peril to the end and loudly proclaims calamities that chill the warmth of my heart, if I do not take vengeance on my father's murderers. He said that, enraged by the loss of my possessions, I should kill them in requital just as they killed. And he declared that *otherwise I should pay the debt myself with my own life, after many grievous sufferings* [my emphasis].

Orestes' situation is not radically different from the one that Agamemnon faced at Aulis: The crime is not only permitted but also imposed by a divine force, in this case by Apollo. His father's *Erinyes*, who are in charge of the chain of revenge, will not cease to haunt Orestes if he fails to accomplish the required act. By contrast, the accomplishment

of matricide will obviously trigger Clytemnestra's *Erinyes*. Orestes, no less than Agamemnon, is doomed to a downfall.⁴⁸

However, Orestes is also able to make a distinction between his own motives and Apollo's order:

Besides the god's command, my keen grief for my father, and also the pinch of poverty -that my countrymen, the most renowned of mortals, who overthrew Troy in the spirit of glory, should not be subjected so to a pair of women. (300-305)

And in the following lines, the two sources of action are reminded in a very succinct formula:

Yet with the help of the gods, and with the help of my own hands, will she not atone for the dishonor she did my father? Let me only take her life, then let me die! (434)

In *Eumenides*, this complicity between Orestes and Apollo becomes a subject of lively debate. In the very beginning of the play, Apollo ensures that he will protect Orestes by accepting the centrality of his role in the crime (64). In the following passages, Orestes seems reticent to deny his contribution to the act; but he nevertheless points at the collective character of the crime in question by openly suggesting that Apollo is also responsible [*aitios*] for the matricide (465). Finally, Apollo clearly advocates Orestes' innocence by emphasizing his own responsibility (580).

In a sense, the divine and human contributions to the crime are considered in such clear terms that one would have legitimate ground for denying any objectivity in Orestes' matricide: The crime is thoroughly discussed on the basis of Orestes' and Apollo's degrees of responsibility. However, in line with Scheler's principle, this discussion is never finalized and the guilt is never "localized" through a minute analysis

⁴⁸ For this point, see Dodds (1960)

of different agents' contributions to it. More importantly, when one thinks about the whole play and considers the context in which these arguments are put forth, the situation becomes subtler. A more attentive reading will show that the trial, in fact, does not focus primarily on the degrees of responsibility of Apollo and Orestes, but rather on the quality of the crime in question. In a passage, which is significant in this respect, Orestes expressly privileges the elements that justify his murder instead of his degree of responsibility. Having accepted his and Apollo's complicity in the act, Orestes turns to the god of oracles and says:

Apollo, give your testimony now. Explain, on my behalf, whether I was justified in killing her. For I do not deny that I did it, as it is done. But decide whether this bloodshed was, to your mind, just or not, so that I may inform the court [my emphasis]. (609)

In the final decision, in which Athena's opinion plays the key role, what saves Orestes from being found guilty is not Apollo's responsibility in the act but the quality of the crime. For Athena, Orestes' matricide is relatively more justifiable than Clytemnestra's murder of her husband (734). This idea is a part of another central theme which is continuously revisited during the trial of Orestes. A clear expression of it is found in Apollo's speech on the superiority of the father's part in the conception of a child. By giving the example of Zeus, Apollo brings in the idea -which is widely accepted in Ancient Greece- that the indispensable active role belongs to the father who "seeds" the relatively passive "soil" that the mother offers (657). For this reason, the argument goes, the murder of the husband is relatively more blameworthy than that of the mother.

The trial scene, which covers the major part of *Eumenides*, offers us a good opportunity to observe the way in which a human crime is discussed in a formal context in Aeschylus. Significantly enough, even though the theme of responsibility is discussed

in the play, it does not constitute a major component of the debate on Orestes' crime. In line with (i), no clear decision concerning the relation between the agent and the act is taken, since neither the court, nor Orestes himself is primarily focused on this. And in line with (ii), what counts for the juridical evaluation is primarily the objective quality of the act.

Hence in *Oresteia*, we find ourselves in a world of values in which the objectivity of human error constitutes a major ethical and juridical element. It is true that this objectivity does not dominate the action from the beginning to the end: As we have seen in the second and third plays, the theme of responsibility is not utterly neglected by the protagonists. In a sense, the objectivity of error constitutes the main paradigm of the ethical universe of *Oresteia*, but its dominance does not eliminate the question of agency, which is already an important element of the sphere of values.⁴⁹

In order to relate our discussion of objective error to the succeeding phases of the history of ethical notions (and especially to the Augustinian moment), we think that it might be useful to go over certain traits of the anthropology and psychology that such a conception of action implies. During the twentieth century, various scholars focused on the radical differences between the terms and presuppositions that shaped the experience of human action in Greece of fifth century and in modern times, and the debate is far

⁴⁹ In fact, Suzanne Saïd thinks that the history of tragedy in the fifth century is also that of a gradual dethronement of the idea of objective error. In some of Sophocles' plays -such as *Oedipus at Colonus*- this objectivity is criticized with recourse to the personal motives underlying an act. In Euripides, there is an overgrowing tendency to distinguish between divine and human elements in acts, so that no ambiguity is left. See Saïd (1978), pp. 199-263.

from being closed.⁵⁰ Without entering into the details of this debate and of its implications, we will only emphasize two general features that characterized fifth century Greeks' experience of human action.

The Absence of Any Clear Distinction Between the "Inner" and the "Outer"

On the basis of the cases that we have presented, one may still be tempted to think that there is a simple causal relation between human beings and divine powers, one which may be defined as the imposition of a decision taken by a powerful agent on a weaker one. In fact, the complicity between Orestes and Apollo, as well as the impasse into which Artemis leads Agamemnon, may seem to exemplify a mode of relationship in which a human being acts under compulsion and an external divine power imposes limits on him. But once the reader changes the focus from gods to minor deities and other non-personalized divine forces, this view will be seriously challenged. And this fact is of extreme import, since those deities are usually powers that directly act on human beings and influence their actions. The Olympian gods change human beings' fields of action, either by modifying the surrounding conditions of agents (such as Artemis' tempest), or by using those divine powers (such as *atê*), which, in their turn, act directly on human beings. Therefore, to comprehend the complexity of the relation between human and divine spheres, one should focus on the way in which those powers influence human beings.

⁵⁰ The works of Bruno Snell and Alfred Adkins can be considered as the key texts in which this distance is underlined (See especially Adkins (1960) and Snell (1979)). More recently, certain scholars moved towards a critique of this position by emphasizing the relevance of the ethical conception of the Greeks for our modern standpoint and by trying to borrow some of its elements in order to ameliorate the contemporary ethics. For such a standpoint, see Williams (1985) and (1993), Nussbaum (1986), Gill (1996).

Ruth Padel, in her book on the relation between the inner world of human beings and the outer world surrounding them, claims that “tragic emotion is represented essentially as other in self.”⁵¹ This remark becomes quite illuminating when grounded by the numerous examples that Padel presents: The bodily liquids of the innards [*splachna*], the changes of which are considered to shape human emotional life, are elements that are open to the diverse influences of inner and outer factors. When a fighting man “breathes,” the breath -says the poet- is also that of Ares.⁵² When *Erinyes* change the attitudes of human beings, their activity takes place simultaneously in the human innards and in their dwelling places in the underworld.⁵³

What is striking here is that the effects of the divinities on the emotive state of human beings cannot be reduced to external interventions. Non-human forces such as *atê* or *Erinyes* are not personal figures that are shaping agents’ fields of actions from outside, but are rather forces that take part in the acting processes by being literally in the agent and by acting on his innards. And the presence of non-human forces both in and out of human agents has two crucial consequences: The first more obvious consequence is that, while experiencing certain states of mind such as madness (which are central for tragic action), the human being is not alone. The changes in emotions happen with the contribution of an external force operating inside the human being. The second consequence concerns the active role that human beings play in situations in which they are led by non-human forces: Divine intervention, usually operating via daimonic forces, is far from leading to an absolute determination that shapes human

⁵¹ Padel (1992), p. 157.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

action immediately. Neither Greek gods, nor the minor deities in their service are abstract powers that immediately shape the chain of events. They are, so to speak, concrete forces that act on and work through concrete agents. Hence their intervention does not lead to the closure of the field of human action, but takes place inside this very field. A human being does not lose his/her capacity to act; he/she rather acts in a different way than he would “normally” do.

The experience of *atê*, which occupies a central position in Greek tragedy, is significant in this respect. The term (which, as we have already noted, covers a wide sphere of meanings ranging from madness and disaster to misfortune and fault), as well as the field of experiences that relate to it, have been considered to be of key importance to understand the notion of human error from Homer to tragedies. For this reason, there have been significant attempts to treat the terms *atê* and *hamartia* together and to underline the continuities, resemblances and overlaps that exist between their respective fields of usage.⁵⁴ The main idea behind these attempts has been that the instances of the Aristotelian idea of *hamartia* can best be understood by considering the genealogical affinity of this notion with the Homeric and post-Homeric *atê*. This term, central for the Homeric experience of human error, has two pivotal characteristics that may shed light on *hamartia*: On the one hand, it is usually defined as an external force that seizes human beings and acts on their innards. On the other hand, it is both an error and the misfortune caused by this error. Therefore, in the Homeric *atê*, one can find a form of

⁵⁴ For the most considerable examples of such attempts, see Dawe (1968), Bremer (1969) and Saïd (1978), pp. 75-95.

error that goes beyond the limits of human agent and that unites the experiences of error and misfortune.⁵⁵

This term is especially illuminating for the Aeschylean universe where the experiences of error and misfortune usually overlap.⁵⁶ And it has an essential role in the episode at Aulis, since the change that Agamemnon undergoes right after he gives the order of Iphigenia's sacrifice is an outcome of *atê*.⁵⁷ Moreover, the way in which *atê* influences Agamemnon is very typical in that it is described as a "reckless blast, vile and unholy" that changes the hero (*Agamemnon*, 251): *Atê* is like a breath or a wind that passes through the human being and changes him. Padel remarks that the passage does not give any clear clue about the source of this "blast," thereby inviting the reader to recognize a continuity between the wind outside and the breath inside, and fostering the ambivalence of the ethical significance of the act.⁵⁸

The Absence of a Unified Center of Decision such as Will

The absence of clear-cut boundaries between inner and outer elements is accompanied by another absence that will have far-reaching consequences for our study: the absence of the category of will.⁵⁹ The recognition of this absence is vitally important for the

⁵⁵ Saïd (1978), p. 78, 81 and 83.

⁵⁶ For a historical survey of the transformation that the term *atê* underwent between Homer and the tragedians, see Saïd (1978), pp. 75-95 and Dodds (1951), pp. 37-41. Dodds (1951), pp. 1-27 also presents the main aspects of the Homeric usage of the term.

⁵⁷ *Agamemnon*, 215. Note that the force that causes Agamemnon's state of derangement in this passage is *parakopa*, which has more or less the same field of usage with *atê*. See Rivier (1968), p. 32 and Saïd (1978), p. 113

⁵⁸ Padel (1995), p. 95.

⁵⁹ For an elaborate account of the absence of the category of will in Greek tragedy, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Ebauches de la volonté dans la tragédie Grecque" in Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), pp. 41-73. Although they do not give reference to Greek tragedy, the following sources are also helpful in coming to terms with the development of the notion of will: Dihle (1982), Kahn (1988), Sorabji (2000).

critique of the “freedom vs. determination” paradigm that we scrutinized in previous parts. This paradigm is invalid in the case of ancient Greek tragedy (and philosophy), since it takes human agent as a unified center endowed with a centralized faculty of acting, the “freedom” of which is occasionally restrained. However, no such conception holds for the tragic agent, since he/she would be better conceived as an open field of forces. When a human being is under the influence of a divine force, the situation is not experienced as the hindrance of an allegedly free faculty, but rather as the impact of an external power on a particular part of the innards, mostly on *thumos* or *phren*. It would be adequate to think that human action, in Greek tragedies, is conceived as the product of the interplay between different inner forces which are at times articulated with outer forces such as *atê* or *Erinyes*. This multiplicity of forces is what enables us to make sense of the Kierkegaardian formula, according to which the tragic hero’s action is also a passion. There is no action that would emanate directly from a “pure” faculty of acting, but always a confluence of forces that give birth to a combination of actions and passions.

Greek Philosophy and the Objectivity of Error

It is a widely accepted fact that the closure of the golden age of Greek tragedy overlapped with the opening of a new era marked by the over-growing importance of philosophical thinking in Athens. Nietzsche, in his *Birth of Tragedy*, vividly describes the entrance of “Socrates the philosopher” into the scene and the significance of this key event for the history of tragedy: Socrates’ invitation to the search for truth is coupled

with a radical denunciation of the tragic worldview.⁶⁰ And his most active collaborator, according to Nietzsche, has been the last great tragic poet Euripides, or, “Euripides the thinker” who had set himself the goal of “understanding” his predecessors, and who naturally failed in this impossible enterprise.⁶¹ As is well known, the philosophical articulation of Socrates’ anti-tragic attitude has constituted one of the prevalent themes in Plato’s work. The philosopher’s famous reaction to tragic poets (*Republic*, Books III and X), his attempt to formulate a philosophical notion of *technê* that would be operative in manipulating the working of *tuchê* (chance),⁶² his repugnance for ethical paradoxes (*Eutyphro* 8A) are all various facets of this anti-tragic position.

However, the deeper aspect of this anti-tragic move -the one that will concern us here- relates to the dethronement of tragic error together with its ethical implications. As Suzanne Saïd suggests in the closing lines of her book, “tragic error, with its ambiguities and contradictions, is no longer a reality for the philosopher. [...] It is therefore necessary to prohibit it together with its creator.”⁶³ As we will show in the following pages, the form of problematization that Plato and Aristotle propose, along with their philosophical formulations concerning these problems, belong to a paradigm that seems to exclude the objectivity of human error as we find it in the tragedies. Even the simple move of eliminating divine powers from any theoretical treatment of human action is sufficient to think that Plato and Aristotle have taken considerable distance from the world of Aeschylus. They no longer have to deal with the “border zone” between human

⁶⁰ Nietzsche (1993), ch. 13, pp. 64-67

⁶¹ *ibid.*, ch. 11, pp. 54-59.

⁶² For this point, see Nussbaum (1986), pp. 89-121.

⁶³ Saïd (1979), p. 510 (my translation).

and divine levels, which makes the problem of human responsibility unsolvable. For them, responsibility can be made comprehensible from a philosophical and juridical standpoint.

However, in underlining the difference between the mentality of the fourth century philosophers and the universe of the fifth century tragedies, one should refrain from seeing their change of perspective as an abrupt development. In fact, we know that various aspects of the belief in Olympian deities were already under attack, as the illuminative case of Xenophanes shows us. As to the question of responsibility, we have already mentioned in a previous section that the categories of *akon* and *hekon* were in use in Athenian courts in order to clarify the relation between the agent and his action. In that sense, it would be misleading to conceive Greek tragedies as the direct reflections of the social life of Athens. In reality, they represent only certain aspects of a versatile transformation that took place in Greek social life in the fifth century. Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies, on the other hand, should not be conceived as the representative responses of an utterly non-tragic century to its tragic predecessor. The two philosophers inherited some of their central concepts and presuppositions from the preceding "tragic" century and they relocated them into a relatively new philosophical paradigm.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that those elements that seemingly belonged to an anti-tragic worldview were not entirely alien to the world of tragedies. In fact, as we have already shown in the case of Aeschylus, there was already a legal problematization of human responsibility in the tragedies of the fifth century B.C., in which the terms like *akon* and *hekon* were recurrently used. The use of these categories became even more apparent in a writer like Sophocles, and they gained a key position in the theatre of

Euripides, where the tendency to delineate divine and human causes underlying human acts became clearly observable.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, it would be meaningful to remember certain aspects of Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies in order to comprehend how they took their distance from the world of the fifth century. A glance at certain key passages of the Platonic and Aristotelian corpuses may be illuminating in this respect: A great part of Book IX of Plato's *Laws*, for instance, is dedicated to the presentation of the criteria for deciding on the degree of responsibility of agents in relatively complex situations. In many passages of this dialogue, the categories *akon* and *hekon*⁶⁵ are used; and Plato's main goal here is to remove any ambiguity from the juridical appreciation of responsibility. The same *akon-hekon* pair is also central for Aristotle's theory of human action and it constitutes the keystone of arguably the most developed theory of responsibility among the works of ancient philosophy. Through an extensive technical elaboration of these terms, Aristotle makes a clear-cut distinction between acts that are ethically relevant and those that are not: The acts that are done out of ignorance of particular circumstances as well as those that are done under compulsion are considered to be *akousiai* and they are left outside the sphere of ethical evaluation. While those actions may be objects of indulgence and pity, only the *hekousiai* acts are ethically blamable.⁶⁶

A more striking and somewhat intriguing example is found in "the myth of Er" that Socrates tells at the end of Plato's *Republic* (Book X, 614b-621b). The myth is

⁶⁴ For a detailed study of the differences between the three tragic poets' approaches to the problem of error, see Saïd (1979), pp. 147-279.

⁶⁵ The passage between 860d - 864d, where the categories of justice, injustice and injury are discussed with reference to the *akon - hekon* pair, is representative in this respect.

⁶⁶ See the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, esp. 1109b-1110b

based on the testimony of Er, a man who died in war and whose soul has been resent among human beings so that he can tell them what happens after the soul leaves the body. There are at least two elements in the myth that have strong ethical implications and that deserve closer attention: First, the experience of afterlife is shaped by a logic of reward and punishment that seems to put the emphasis on personal responsibility. As Socrates tells us, dead people pay their penalties in proportion to “the unjust things they had done” when they were living the earthly life (615a). Second, the assignment of the new guardian spirit that will shape a soul’s new life depends on personal choice and not on divine intervention. This point is made clear by the announcement that the Speaker makes to souls:

Your daemon or guardian spirit will not be assigned to you by lot; you will choose him. [...] Virtue knows no master; each will possess it to a greater or less degree, depending on whether he values or disdains it. The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none. (617d-e)

Thus, the myth underlines the centrality of human responsibility both in the system of reward-punishment after the earthly life and in the choice of the succeeding life. We think that the second element (the choice of lives) is especially interesting, since it represents a clear effort for distinguishing human and divine factors that underlie the choice. Indeed, the Speaker’s words explicitly rule out any sort of uncertainty concerning divine contribution. As a result, there seems to be no trace of tragic ambiguity in this process.

Nevertheless, a detailed reading of the myth reveals the fact that it does not give a completely consistent account of ethical responsibility. Although there is a clear demarcation line between human and divine responsibility, the ethical implications of

this distinction are not as “anti-tragic” as they seem to be at first sight. In fact, the choice is a complex phenomenon that has to do with a number of ethical and non-ethical factors. It is true that the choice procedure is intrinsically related with the type of character that one had in his former life and that it is, in some sense, a function of the ethical quality of the agent before he dies. But there are two other factors that have their own respective roles throughout the choice process. First, the order in which the choices will be made is decided by lottery. Hence, even though “there is a satisfactory life rather than a bad one available even for the one who comes last” (619b), there is an element of chance in the choice procedure. Second, the quality of a soul’s present choice does not depend solely on the person’s character in his previous life, but also on his afterlife experience. And here, a rather unexpected factor is introduced by Plato: Those who passed their time in Heaven as a reward for their virtuous lives are more akin to making wrong choices, since they are “untrained in suffering” (619d) and, for this reason, they are unaware of the importance of the choice in question. Therefore, “because of this and because of the chance of the lottery, there was an interchange of goods and evils for most of the souls” (619d). To put it in other words, virtuous life is by no means the guarantee of having a better life in the next cycle. Moreover, the gain that comes from ethical life is not cumulative; it has its own increases and declines. Consequently, the regime of rewards and punishments is not as symmetrical as it sounds. It has a complicated way of functioning that has to do with non-ethical factors.

However, even though the myth of Er does not replace the fifth century tragic worldview with a consistent “moralism,” it introduces some elements that are based on anti-tragic concerns. Although it refers to non-ethical factors such as chance, its overall

message fits in well with the main tenets of the ethical project presented in the rest of the *Republic*: The responsibility belongs to the one who makes the choice. It is true that the pursuit of a virtuous life may not be the guarantee of a stable state of happiness in the next life. Nevertheless, Plato makes it clear that virtue gains its genuine sense when it is thought in relation with ethical responsibility. Our past lives, as well as our afterlife experience (e.g. whether we stay in Heaven or not), may influence our choices. However, as Julia Annas says, “in the end the decision is ours and we cannot blame anyone else.”⁶⁷

As a consequence, we think that Aristotle’s and Plato’s ethical perspectives reflect an attitude that aims at a dethronement of tragic error, or at least of the ethical consequences of its objective aspects: No complexity should arise from the interplay of inner and outer motives, as it has been the case in the Aeschylean version of the episode at Aulis. When the ethical relevance of a misdeed is to be determined, external influences may be reduced to compulsions that diminish the degree of responsibility of the agent. Hence, there seems to be no room for any sort of “double-motivation” paradigm, since what counts is only the human motivation, comprehensible in abstraction from its external environment. The human being, as far as the ethical sphere is concerned, is no longer envisioned as an open field where internal and external sources of action would intermingle with each other.

This point is important, primarily because it shows us how Plato and Aristotle have prepared the background for the “anti-tragic” position of Augustine. In our third chapter, we will highlight the structural parallelism between, on the one hand, Plato’s

⁶⁷ Annas (1981), p. 352.

and Aristotle's ways of dealing with the "objective" notion of error and, on the other, Augustine's efforts to describe sin on a "subjective" basis. In other words, we will argue that it may be rewarding to look for the echoes of the anti-tragic attitude of Greek philosophers in Augustine's anti-Manichean position. Reading Augustine with such a parallelism in mind will enable us to reevaluate his role in the history of *ethical* and *tragic* problematizations under a new light.

On the other hand, laying emphasis on such a structural parallelism between the two positions will also be an opportunity for pinpointing certain substantial differences between them: Augustine's anti-Manichaeism was anti-tragic in some significant respects, but it will be of prime importance to see how it differed from Aristotle's and Plato's positions. As we will show, since Augustine's "anti-tragic" attitude developed in a significantly different intellectual context, it gave birth to a considerably different strategy for coping with the "objectivity" of error. As a result, the notions of "free choice" and "will" -that were not central for Plato and Aristotle- appeared as the new, innovative elements of Augustine's anti-tragic enterprise.

However, before moving on to the discussion of Augustine's thought, we need to present the second part of our account of Greek tragedy. This time, we will consider the Aristotelian notion of *hamartia* and the way Renaissance criticism dealt with it. We hope that this will enable us to approach Augustine's position from a more elaborate perspective.

CHAPTER III
“SUBJECTIFICATION” OF TRAGIC ERROR:
ARISTOTLE AND HIS READERS

One of the main starting-points of the present work has been the following observation: Beginning with the Renaissance, i.e. the period in which tragedy and its Aristotelian interpretation has been rediscovered, critics have shown an obvious tendency to make what we have called “subject-centered interpretations” of tragedies. By “subject-centered interpretation” we mean a particular form of reading that takes human action primarily in its personal aspects and with a particular focus on the conditions of the agent, which is considered as the only ethically relevant source of action. From such a perspective, the action is considered less as an objective event than as a “subjective” experience having definite psychological and ethical dimensions to be meticulously analyzed for a proper interpretation of the tragic action. To put it differently, this mode of reading focuses on the conditions and qualities of acting agents (such as their “character” traits), and the actions themselves gain their psychological, ethical or even aesthetic relevance on this basis. If there is action, there should be a “subject” who gives birth to it, who has a particular mode of experiencing it and who has to go through its different consequences.

The present chapter will focus on this “subject-centered reading” with the hope of accomplishing two interrelated tasks: First, we will attempt to present a more elaborate formulation of our initial problematic by underlining the significance of this

mode of reading for the history of thought. Second, we will prepare the scene for the entrance of Augustine who has, in our view, a major and quite complex role in the formation of this mode of reading. Seemingly, these two tasks will force us to make a gigantic and somewhat dramatic leap in history: Following our consideration of the fourth century B.C. philosophers' response to tragedy, we will have to make a long trip to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries A.D. where certain aspects of this "subject-centered interpretation" can be clearly observed. We hope that this long trip (which may pose serious problems for the historian looking for a detailed account of the ruptures and continuities) will be legitimized by the nature of our main problematic: We will have no claim to explain the historical transformation that happened within a time span of twenty centuries. Our incomparably less ambitious goal will be to point out certain symptomatic elements of the reaction of Renaissance and post-Renaissance critics to ancient tragedy, and especially to the first theoretical treatment of it, which is Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is only after underlining these symptoms that we will attempt at a partial clarification of this huge and multifarious transformation. This will be the subject-matter of our third and fourth chapters, where we will introduce Augustine.

We think that it is hard to deny Aristotle's part in the development of the tendency to offer "subject-centered" readings of tragedy. After all, Aristotle has been the one who set the terms of the debate by introducing the notion of *hamartia* in the *Poetics*, and by relating the hero's downfall to some sort of an error. Consequently, it is impossible to understand the post-Renaissance position without clarifying its relation with Aristotle's theory. For this reason, the present chapter will begin with a section on Aristotle where the famous *hamartia*-passage in *Poetics* (Chapter 13) and the various

problems related to its interpretation will be considered. Throughout this presentation, we will first try to understand the extent to which Aristotle's reading was distant from the tragic scene of the fifth century Athens. Second, we will explain why this distance *does not* represent a radical rupture from the tradition and does not lead us to see Aristotle as the main responsible for the "subject-centered" reading of tragedy. In the second section, we will focus on certain examples of post-Renaissance readings of Aristotle and tragedy, in order to show that the real rupture that popularized the "subject-centered" reading of tragedies happened there.

Hamartia in Poetics

The term *hamartia* is introduced by Aristotle in Book 13 of the *Poetics* where the characteristics of the ideal tragic plot are discussed. Here, Aristotle uses a strategy that is familiar to us from his other writings: He considers some possible answers to his initial question ("What is the ideal tragic plot?") and analyses them in the light of some criteria that he has introduced in the preceding parts.

The basic criterion that Aristotle puts forward concerns the effect that a given tragedy should have on the audience. Accordingly, the ideal tragic plot should contribute to the formation of the basic feelings that the play should arouse on its audience, i.e. the feelings [*pathé*] of pity [*eleos*] and fear [*phobos*] (1449b). Consequently, a tragic plot should face the audience with a situation of undeserved suffering (through which pity will be aroused) that befalls someone who is like us (through which fear will be aroused) (1453a).

On the basis of these two basic feelings, one may discern the two variables that Aristotle takes into account while considering the possible tragic plots enlisted in Chapter 13 (1452b30-1453a15). The first variable is the direction of the change that the protagonist undergoes in the play. The tragic plot should present us a situation of downfall, since the opposite movement (such as that of a man who reaches happiness at the end of the play) would show the audience nothing to be pitied or feared. The second variable is related to the quality of the person subjected to the movement of the plot, i.e. the degree in which the protagonist can be qualified as good or bad.¹ Evidently, the downfall should not happen to someone who is depraved, since neither pity nor fear would be aroused in such a situation. To show the downfall of an intrinsically good person is not proper either, for in such a situation the feelings of pity and fear would be overshadowed by a more powerful feeling of disgust.

On the basis of these criteria, Aristotle considers the possible movements that a tragic plot can include:

The first possible movement that Aristotle takes into account is that of a worthy [*epieikês*] man undergoing a transition from good fortune to bad fortune. These are the cases, as we have already said, in which our strong feeling of disgust in witnessing such an injustice impedes the arousal of feelings of pity or fear. The second possibility is represented by cases in which depraved people undergo a change from bad fortune to good fortune. This time, we are further removed from the ideal tragic effect: First, our feeling of disgust is once again triggered by the injustice fostered by the situation.

¹ The terms Aristotle uses in the passage (1453a5) are the cognates of *kakia* and *mochthêria*, both denoting badness in the general sense. Since the Greek language does not make any clear distinction between the moral and non-moral connotations of those terms, it would be unfair to translate them as “immoral” or “morally bad.” However, it is safe to suggest that these terms refer to the general character traits of the persons and, for that matter, belong to the ethical language of Aristotle.

Second, feelings of pity and fear are not only overshadowed by a feeling of disgust, but they are completely absent from the beginning to the end, since we have no reason to identify ourselves with the depraved person in question. Consequently, this case is seen by Aristotle as “the least tragic of all” (1452b37). The third possibility is found in cases in which a very wicked person falls from good fortune to bad fortune. Although this time the justice inherent in the situation makes it agreeable to watch, the lack of identification with the wicked person prevents the feeling of pity and fear once again.

After considering these three possibilities (and after tacitly ruling out the cases in which good people would be rewarded with good fortune), Aristotle proposes his ideal tragic plot by introducing the famous notion of *hamartia*. It is noteworthy that this fourth possibility has a categorical difference compared to the other three (and the one that Aristotle tacitly discarded). This fourth case presents us a person who has an intermediate position, while in the other situations the qualities of the person in question were characterized in absolute terms such as wicked, depraved or decent. This time, we are faced with a person who is “not outstanding in moral excellence or justice” (1453a10), and whose fall does not arise from a moral defect or depravity, but from an error [*hamartia*]. Aristotle seems to think that the inclusion of *hamartia* would make a plot tragic for two basic reasons: First, such a plot would present us a situation of downfall without arousing any feeling of disgust, since the person who undergoes the fall is not intrinsically good, i.e. not outstanding in moral excellence. Second, although the person in question is not exceptionally good, his fall will still be able to awaken in us the feelings of pity and fear, since it is partly undeserved. The fall is triggered by an error, an *hamartia*, but there is always a disequilibrium between the two (i.e. between

the error and the fall). As a consequence, the audience refrains from conceiving the downfall as a deserved punishment and consequently feels pity and fear.

One would be right to see in this *hamartia* passage the traces of a rupture from the fifth century mentality, a rupture that would be critical for the development of “subject-centered” readings: By relating the central dyad of reversal and recognition² to the situation of the protagonist, Aristotle seems to invite us to focus on the personal factors that leads one to a tragic downfall. Hence, he seems to rule out any recourse to a “border zone” where divine intervention may be an ambiguous constituent of the actions preceding the tragic ending. Insofar as it takes human action in isolation from divine powers, then, Aristotle’s account of tragic action seems to be at a distance from the world of fifth century tragedy.³

However, we think that the recognition of the novelty of the Aristotelian outlook should not lead us to consider the Stagirite as *the* founder of what we have called the “subject-centered” interpretation. At least two important passages of *Poetics* offer us good evidence for this: The first passage is the one in which Aristotle suggests that, among the elements that constitute a tragedy, plot [*mythos*] - considered as the *mimesis* of an action [*praxis*] - is more important than character [*ethos*], and that “a tragedy is impossible without an action, but there may be one without characters” (1450a23-24). A good tragedy, i.e. a tragedy which can arouse the proper effect on the audience, is the one that has a good arrangement of the incidents (1450a16), and not the one in which

² These are two other technical terms that Aristotle discusses at *Poetics* 11. Reversal [*peripateia*] is the change of the action to the opposite direction, as it happens at the moment when the downfall happens. Recognition [*anagnorisis*] is a shift from ignorance to the awareness of the protagonist’s true condition of life.

³ Various commentators have underlined this distance. See Saïd (1978), p. 24; Bremer (1969), p. 156; Else (1957), p. 474.

characters are successfully depicted. Moreover, reversal and recognition, which are the elements through which pity and fear are aroused, do not belong to characters, but are parts of the plot (1450a18). The presentation of characters, in this context, is not an end in itself, but it is done for the sake of the action.

The preference of giving precedence to action rather than characters is better understood when one recalls that what Aristotle has in mind here is different from the modern idea of character, which refers to a set of psychological traits shaping the mode of existence of a human being.⁴ In this modern sense of the term, “character” refers to the totality of qualities that shape a person’s internal life, which is conceived as the source of the person’s observable, external aspects. Aristotle’s *êthos*, however, has a much narrower scope: It does not refer to a cluster of psychological qualities, but rather to a set of dispositions that are developed and manifested in action. And this conception does not give any priority to internal characteristics, conceived as the causes of external aspects.⁵

The other passage which shows that Aristotle’s reading is not “subject-centered” is the *hamartia* clause that we have already presented. We think that a closer reading of the passage confirms Aristotle’s reluctance to conceive the tragic downfall as the direct consequence of the essential qualities belonging to the hero’s *êthos*: By suggesting that the fall should not arise from a moral defect or depravity but from an error [*hamartia*], Aristotle seems to put forward a somewhat indirect relation between the personal

⁴ Halliwell (1987), p. 94.

⁵ John Jones’ remarks in Jones (1962), p. 33 are rewarding for understanding this point: “Aristotle is assaulting the now settled habit in which we see action issuing from a solitary focus of consciousness - secret, inward, interesting- and in which the status of action must always be adjectival: action qualifies; it tells us things we want to know about the individual promoting it; the life of action is our ceaseless, animating consideration of the state of affairs ‘inside’ him who acts, without which action is empty and trivial, an effluvium.”

qualities of the agent and the tragic downfall. The centrality of *hamartia*, in such a case, arises from its contingent character: It is not the direct product of the agent's make-up, but an "event" which has no definite source in the human being.

This reading of the passage provides us good reasons to suggest that the Aristotelian *hamartia* may be understood from a perspective that considers human error in its objectivity. For Aristotle, one may argue, the error leading to the downfall has an objective quality in the sense that it does not have to be a direct result of the agent's "subjective" aspects. This *hamartia* may very well be considered as an action that belongs primarily to the realm of objective events rather than to the field of "subjective" experience.

If we accept that the Aristotelian *hamartia* follows the spirit of the understanding of objective error in the fifth century, then the philosopher's negligence of divine powers becomes less radical than it seems. We can very well suggest that Aristotle, instead of denying any role to divine powers, only "bracketed" their interventions in order to focus on the human aspects of the tragic plot. Evidently, this change of focus is far from being unimportant, but it does not go as far as reducing divine powers to mere accessories of the tragic plot. There is still the possibility to consider the Aristotelian *hamartia* as an objective event and to accept that divine powers contribute to its formation.

We think that Aristotle's well-known silence concerning the ethical aspects of the problem is in harmony with this interpretation. This silence shows that, for Aristotle, the question of *hamartia* does not have to call for a problematization of tragic responsibility. In fact, provided that *hamartia* follows the spirit of the understanding of objective error that prevailed in the fifth century B.C., no theoretical clarification is

needed at this point: The term is loaded with all of the ambiguities that the objective error carries, so that neither the degree of responsibility of the agent, nor the ethical relevance of the error in question can be strictly determined.

Aristotle's terminological choice in the passage in question can be considered a good sign of his willingness to point at the opaqueness of the error in question. As we have already suggested, since the Homeric age, the meaning of *hamartia* and its cognates oscillated between missing the mark and perpetrating a moral offense.⁶ In tragedies, for instance, the meaning of *hamartia* has mostly been a blunder in human relations, but there have also been cases in which *hamartia* denoted evil deeds that may deserve divine punishment.⁷ The lack of clarity in the meaning of *hamartia* is also observed in Aristotle's work. The most definite use of the term in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1135b10) locates it somewhere in between misadventures [*atuchema*] and injustices [*adikema*]: *Hamartiai* are cases in which the person acts in ignorance of the nature of the act, the instrument used or the end in view. But it is impossible to take this as a rigid definition that would apply to other occurrences of the term in Aristotle's ethical theory. The Aristotelian use of the term *hamartema*, as Padel remarks, "is at the center of a spectrum between misdeed and misfortune. It looks both ways: to morality and to failure."⁸

This means that we should not adopt a restricted standpoint in determining the sphere of meaning of this notion. Some renowned scholars of the twentieth century have in fact underlined this point, and we follow them in this regard. The remarkable article

⁶ Stinton (1990), p. 144.

⁷ Bremer (1969), p. 47.

⁸ Padel (1995), p. 184. Stephen Halliwell makes a similar point in Halliwell (1998), p. 221.

of Stinton,⁹ to give the most famous example, questioned the existing tendencies to give narrowing accounts for the significance of the term and proposed a more flexible translation depending on the context. Stephen Halliwell, another contemporary commentator, followed Stinton's perspective by suggesting that *hamartia* is situated "somewhere in the space between guilt and vulnerability to misfortune."¹⁰ In emphasizing the multi-dimensional character of the term, his aim was not to point at the technical complexities related to its use, but rather to show that the term was not used in any technical sense. The open-endedness of the term, Halliwell thinks, is not the weakness but the power of the Aristotelian theory, since this flexibility helps the term to reconcile the impersonal aspect of tragic misfortune with the "human agent's active, yet largely innocent implication" in the formation of events.¹¹

Hamartia after Aristotle

If we accept that Aristotle followed to some extent the fifth century spirit of objective error, we have good reasons to suggest that the main rupture -that we have qualified as the "subjectification of error"- happened in Renaissance and post-Renaissance criticism.¹² In our view, the radical change occurred when the Renaissance critics wanted to clarify the sphere of use of *hamartia*: Dissatisfied with the ambiguities that this non-technical term brought with it, they tried to give a unified and consistent

⁹ T. W. C. Stinton, "Hamartia in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy" in Stinton (1990), pp. 143-185.

¹⁰ Halliwell (1998), p. 220.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 229.

¹² The Aristotelian use of the term *hamartia* did not become a topic of discussion until the second half of the fifteenth century, since the Medieval Europe did not show any interest in Aristotle's theory of poetry. In fact, apart from Averroes' partial interpretation of the treatise in the thirteenth century (in which the *hamartia* clause was not discussed at all), there was no serious attempt to interpret *Poetics*. See Bremer (1969), pp. 65-66 and Somville (1975), p. 135.

account of the error in question. This effort has been coupled with (and usually motivated by) the insight that all tragic downfalls, if they deserve to be seen as such, should be triggered by an *hamartia*. Hence the term, which Aristotle mentioned quite incidentally as a factor in the arousal of pity and fear, became a major criterion to distinguish genuine tragedies from those that are not. The popularization of the term has led the critics to what Halliwell called the “*hamartia*-hunting”¹³ and has marked the attitudes of most readers from the Renaissance onwards.

The most important outcome of this over-growing interest in *hamartia* has been the development of a “moralistic bias”¹⁴ in reading tragedies and Aristotle. This tendency, mostly observable in the works of French and English critics, deserves special attention here: By introducing the problem of responsibility, critics turned the question of *hamartia* into an ethical problematic and they thereby gave the most vivid examples of “subject-centered” interpretations. Through their readings, *hamartia* ceased to belong to the somewhat ambiguous sphere of objective events and began to be treated as a part of the hero’s “subjective” experience.

It might be helpful to note that the development of this moralizing interpretation owes much to the transformation that the meaning of *hamartia* underwent in Greek and Latin versions of the Bible. In effect, long before these discussions began, the Greek word *hamartia* had gained obvious moral and religious connotations: Both the *Septuagint* translation of the Old Testament and the original Greek text of the New

¹³ Halliwell (1998), p. 216. He rightly reminds that in *Poetics*, “it is neither stated, nor clearly implied that *hamartia* is or should be a feature of all kinds of tragedy.”

¹⁴ The term and its variants are used in Halliwell (1998), p. 216, n. 19; Saïd (1978), p. 16 and Bremer (1969), pp. 65-98.

Testament used the word *hamartia* as an equivalent for sin.¹⁵ Besides, all major Latin translations preferred the term *peccatum* as the equivalent of *hamartia*. From this perspective, it is not surprising that in the first Latin translations of *Poetics* (that of Valla in 1498, to cite one example), the moral term *peccatum* was preferred.

The most extreme version of this moralistic bias is observable in the works of critics who were attentive to the just distribution of merits and punishments on the stage.¹⁶ These critics insisted in ignoring the delicate aspects of Aristotle's formulations and preferred to see the error of the tragic protagonist as the nodal point of a well-balanced distribution of crimes and punishments. The idea of "poetic justice," which would later be popularized by English critics, was already a paradigmatic element of leading French interpreters such as Chapelain, Scudéry or Abbé d'Aubignac.¹⁷ La Mesnardière, the emblematic figure of this attitude, gave the most articulate expression of this approach by emphasizing the balance between the crimes of a hero and the downfall that he suffers. Even his basic definition of tragedy is under the sway of this moralistic attitude: "[tragedy] is a serious and magnificent poem, the ordinary topic of which is the change of states, the rewarding of good princes and the punishment of the wicked."¹⁸ In tragedies, for him, "bad actions should be punished and virtues should be rewarded."¹⁹

¹⁵ Saïd (1978), p. 12.

¹⁶ Vinaver (1955), p. 100.

¹⁷ Bremer (1969), p. 74.

¹⁸ La Mesnardière, *Poétique*, Paris, 1640, p. 18 (my translation), cited in Bremer (1969), p. 74.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 21.

Interestingly enough, La Mesnardière does not think that these opinions represent a deviation from Aristotle's ideas. In fact, his main reference point happens to be the famous *hamartia* passage of *Poetics*:

Aristotle does not want the Hero to be absolutely virtuous, for in that case he would not deserve the misfortunes that he suffers. This would go directly counter to that exact justice that Aristotle wants to be observed by the scene. (p. 18)

La Mesnardière gives here a vivid example of how the text of a master can be distorted so as to ground the ideas that one wants to defend. He does not hesitate to insert the idea of poetic justice into the text of Aristotle, although the Stagirite's formulation of ideal tragic plot does not make any reference to the just distribution of merits.

Although his moralistic biases are influential and reflect the age he lives in, it would be unfair to present La Mesnardière's stance as the only approach that dominated the French conception of tragedy in the seventeenth century. Besides La Mesnardière's, there was a more moderate position that refrained from emphasizing the equilibrium of merits and punishments, but continued a more or less moralistic attitude by giving precedence to the heroes' or heroines' flaws of characters. André Dacier's authoritative commentary on the *Poetics* dated 1692 is an example of this approach. Dacier attributes a crucial role to the vices of the tragic heroes such as Oedipus and explains his misfortunes with reference to his "pride, violence and rage, his temerity and imprudence."²⁰ It would be right to think that these "moderate moralists" had a relatively more accurate interpretation of the *hamartia* passage, compared to the readings of "extreme moralists" such as La Mesnardière. At least, they did not try to inject a spirit of poetic justice into the Aristotelian theory of ideal plot. However, their tendency to

²⁰ Bremer (1969), p. 79.

explain tragic downfalls with reference to the heroes' essential personal characteristics may also be seen as the outcome of a similar bias in interpreting the *Poetics* passage. Since they read the passage from a "subject-centered" perspective, they overlooked Aristotle's reluctance to establish a direct relation between the downfall of the protagonist and his character traits. By incorporating *hamartia* into the original make-up of an agent and by turning it into a "flaw" of the hero, they tried to establish a reasonable relation between the hero and his/her downfall. Once again, tragic calamities have become at least partially deserved, since a given *hamartia* has always been assumed to be preceded by a particular essential personal weakness: If one falls, they thought, it is because he/she had an imperfection.

The tendencies (1) to find a proper distribution of merits and punishments on stage and (2) to state the existence of a connection between the error and the intrinsic qualities of the hero, had an ongoing influence, especially on the English criticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The term "poetic justice" (coined by Thomas Rymer while translating R. Rapin's book *Réflexions sur la Poétique d'Aristote* in 1674) had a considerable effect on the theoretical interpretations of tragedies.²¹ The 1705 translation of Dacier's commentary on the *Poetics*, on the other hand, had a decisive impact on the English criticism of the eighteenth century.²² Dacier's idea that the error arises from an essential quality of the agent paved the way for the popularization of the translation of the term *hamartia* as "tragic flaw." This translation had an abiding influence that would not diminish before the second half of the twentieth century, especially among the critics of Shakespeare.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 84.

²² *ibid.*, p. 79.

A glance at the writings of the two leading tragic poets of the seventeenth century France, namely Corneille and Racine, may illustrate some subtler aspects of this “subject-centered” reading. Various interpreters have in fact pointed at the presence of obvious moralizing tendencies in Racine and Corneille.²³ But since these two figures are not primarily literary critics but excellent playwrights, their approach to tragedy and tragic error are far from having the one-sidedness of the moralizing readings presented by La Mesnardière or Dacier. However, it might be interesting to see how the theorist simplifies what the poet tries to do, especially in cases in which these two are the same person. In fact, the poetic language and the dramatic structure of the plays of these two prominent writers go beyond the limits of any strict theoretical formulation including their own. However, their theoretical essays reflect the basic tendencies prevailing in their era. And it is interesting to see how much their views about tragedy as a form are influenced by the general “subject-centered” approach that dominated the age.

Corneille, in his *Discours* concerning tragic poetry,²⁴ does not present us an elaborate theory of tragic error. In fact, it would be proper to suggest that to him, tragic error has no central theoretical role, since it contributes little to the formation of the purgatorial effect. As Bremer suggests, what counts in the Cornelian stage is only the “intensity and greatness” of passions,²⁵ and not the ambiguities fostered by the complexities related to the tragic error. Nevertheless, Corneille reflects on the *hamartia* clause of *Poetics* (not in order to understand the true nature of tragic error, but in order to have a deeper understanding of the notions of pity and fear) and he admits that he

²³ See Saïd (1978), p. 14; Vinaver (1955), p. 103; Somville (1975), p. 150.

²⁴ “Discours de la Tragédie et des moyens de la traiter selon le vraisemblable ou le nécessaire” in Corneille (1987), pp. 142-173.

²⁵ Bremer (1969), p. 75.

does not comprehend the signification of Aristotle's examples for good tragic plots. And this lack of comprehension itself deserves attention, since it seems to reflect the limits of Corneille's mentality (and that of his age) in his encounter with the world of Greek tragedy.

In the passage in question,²⁶ Corneille frankly avows that he does not see the reason why Aristotle mentions Oedipus as an example for the ideal tragic hero who, (in Corneille's own terms) by a fault or a human weakness,²⁷ falls into a bad situation that he does not deserve. According to Corneille, the choice of Oedipus is not proper since the Theban king does not seem to commit any crime that should lead him to downfall: He does not kill his father voluntarily, since he does not know him. Corneille adds that, even if we admit that *hamartia* may cover a whole group of different errors (including simple mistakes deriving from unawareness), we cannot see what kind of a passion is to be purged from the audience witnessing the downfall of Oedipus.²⁸

This is not the right place to discuss the relevance of the example of Oedipus, since what is important for us is not the extent in which Aristotle is right or wrong in his choice, but rather the difficulty that Corneille had in getting the true sense of this formula.²⁹ Two fundamental factors seem to prevent Corneille from making a proper

²⁶ Corneille (1987), p. 145.

²⁷ Note that the two terms "*faute*" and "*faiblesse humaine*" are chosen by Corneille for translating *hamartia*.

²⁸ A similar difficulty can be observed in La Mesnardière's reading of *Oedipus*: "There could arise a scruple in the ingenious reader's mind about the adventure of Oedipus which Aristotle often refers to as a marvelous fable. For since it appears that this king is more unfortunate than culpable, his punishment does not seem to fall under the just rules which we have established with the help of the philosopher's words." Cited in Vinaver (1955), p. 101.

²⁹ In fact, there is some kind of unfairness in Corneille's criticism, since Aristotle mentions the names of Oedipus and Thyestes, not because their errors are good cases of *hamartia*, but simply because they are renowned and prosperous men. These examples come right at the end of the paragraph, after the *hamartia*

reading of Aristotle's views on *hamartia*. First, as we have already suggested, he has a tendency to attribute a true crime to Oedipus -and not a simple mistake as the etymology of *hamartia* may suggest. And such a crime, for him, should be *severe enough* for leading the hero towards his tragic end. What he needs, therefore, is to be convinced that Oedipus' *hamartia* may be a central element of a reasonable account of the hero's downfall. Corneille, by this remark, seems to follow the general attitude of his age according to which the question of *hamartia* should be accompanied by a problematization of the ethical aspects of human responsibility. Once the problem is formulated in this way, it becomes difficult for Corneille to imagine a tragic error that is not a fundamentally moral crime and that would nevertheless cause the protagonist's downfall so as to arouse a purgatorial effect.

Therefore, the reason why Corneille escapes from being a simple moralist in his tragedies is not due to the complexity of his conception of tragic error, but rather to his preference to search the tragic effect somewhere else, i.e. in the "*pathétique d'admiration*."³⁰ What makes the downfall of the protagonist "tragic" is not the ambiguity of his/her error, but the way he/she commits and accounts for those errors. What prevents the audience from detesting a protagonist who errs is not the delicacy of his/her situation, but rather his/her "majesty of soul."³¹ The arousal of the tragic effect, hence, depends on the successful presentation of the "subjective" experience of downfall.

remark is made: "[The tragic hero] must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous, -a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families" (*Poetics*, 1453a12).

³⁰ As Bremer suggests, the term is used by Corneille in various occasions to depict the main effect that he wants to create on the audience. See Bremer (1969), p. 75.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 75. We will turn back to this problem in Chapter VI, while discussing Racine's tragedies.

The case of Racine is a bit different. Since he has no *Discours* in which to present his own views about tragedy, we have no chance to make any elaborate comparison between Racine and other interpreters. However, we have enough evidence to think that his insight on the Aristotelian understanding of *hamartia* was more elaborate than that of his contemporaries.³² First of all, he presents an argument against the mainstream view that tragedy must have a moral utility, and suggests that its basic function is to give pleasure.³³ Besides that, he usually abstains from using a prominently moral terminology while depicting his own characters. The way he formulates the situations of an Andromaque or of a Britannicus seems to be more or less loyal to the spirit of the *hamartia*-passage of the *Poetics*.³⁴ In his preface to *Phèdre*, he does not hesitate to present the heroine as “neither entirely guilty, nor entirely innocent” and suggests that her guilt is “rather a punishment of the gods than a movement of her will.”³⁵ But still, one can hardly think that he totally escapes the spirit of his time as far as his formulation of the tragic universe is concerned. Although we may easily find more than one example where Racine wants to prevent any moralistic interpretation of tragedy, he seems to follow the Cornelian insight that *hamartia* cannot be any kind of error, but a true crime that has certain moral consequences. A good indication of this preference can be found in the notes that he wrote on his copy of *Poetics*.³⁶ In the passage where Aristotle cites *hamartia*, Racine made a seemingly unimportant

³² Vinaver (1955), p. 101.

³³ Somville (1975), p. 153.

³⁴ Bremer (1969), p. 76.

³⁵ Racine (1963), p. 175. We will turn back to this point in Chapter VI.

³⁶ J. Racine, *Principes de la tragédie, en marge de la "Poétique" d'Aristote*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, Manchester : Ed. de L'Université, 1944.

correction that is in fact crucial, as Eugène Vinaver showed. Interestingly enough, where Aristotle says “*di’ hamartian tina*” (because of some error), Racine prefers to say “by *his* error” and emphasizes the role of the protagonist in his downfall. Accordingly, the error of the protagonist cannot be seen as a simple mistake of fact, since that would not really count as *his own* error, but rather as the outcome of a group of different factors including the psychological and ethical conditions of the hero.³⁷

There are therefore obvious reasons to suggest that Racine shares the prevalent atmosphere of his time according to which crimes and their observable agents constitute central focus-points of the tragic poetry. As we will see in Chapter VI of the present work, what makes classical French tragedy truly “tragic” is not the debatable status of what may be called a crime as in the case of Greek tragedy. A play is tragic because it has the quasi-magical power to turn a criminal into an object of “compassion” by emphasizing what is noble in him/her despite the baseness of his/her crimes.

We hope that these remarks have sufficiently demonstrated the distance that exists between the Aristotelian interpretation of tragedy and the approaches towards it in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance eras. We think that the “subject-centered” conception of tragic error is a development first manifested in the Renaissance and continues to have its impact on today’s interpreters. If the reader is convinced that not Aristotle but his first modern readers are primarily responsible for the development of this “subject-centered” standpoint, then the basic suggestion of our project (as well as

³⁷ Vinaver’s argument is as follows: “[...] Racine could not admit that a simple ‘error of unawareness’ is the primary drive of the action. For that reason he translates in his annotations ‘by his fault.’ The word ‘fault’ preceded by a possessive has here for Racine all its value of an act of faltering. (Racine (1944), p. 47)”

the question that it brings about) gains a legitimate basis: Something happened between Aristotle and his post-Renaissance interpreters, so that the latter found it more or less normal -and even inevitable- to read tragedies and the *Poetics* from a “subject-centered” perspective. The examples of Racine and Corneille are there to show that this was not a simple problem of scholarly carelessness or lack of intellectual insight: Even the readings of the most attentive, courageous and creative writers were marked by the limits of this “subject-centered” interpretation. There seems to be sufficient reason for being curious about the *sources* of this inclination.

It is also a well-known fact that sixteenth and seventeenth centuries constituted, first and foremost, a period in which tragedy as a literary and theatrical form became highly admired. In fact, we think that the monumental examples of English and French literature (Shakespeare, Marlowe, Racine and Corneille, to cite the most famous ones) are enough to name this period as a new period of tragedy. Hence, it is noteworthy that the inclination to make “subject-centered” readings did not lead to a total disappearance of tragedy as a form. On the contrary, the age witnessed a new, glorious rebirth of it. Hence, as a working hypothesis, we will argue that what we called the “subject-centered” reading of tragedy, far from preventing the development of the genre, accompanied the birth of a new tragedy highly marked by this perspective.

This is where Augustine will lend us a helping hand. In his philosophy, we will not only pinpoint the elements which emphasize the “subjective” aspects of human error, but also those aspects which may be relevant for understanding this new, “subject-centered” tragedy.

PART II: AUGUSTINE AND THE PROBLEM OF ERROR

Preliminary Remarks

In the two following chapters, our focus will be mainly on Augustine's complex theory of sin. As we have already announced in our "Introduction," the Augustinian notion of sin will be analyzed under its two complementary aspects: The anti-Manichean conception that fosters the development of a number of "subjective" elements, and the anti-Pelagian conception that introduces some "objective" elements.

Before moving on to the presentation of this twofold enterprise, we need to make further clarifications about the notion of "subjective."¹ Such clarification is needed, to the extent that the use of the terms "subject" and "subjective" in Augustine's case constitutes a topic of philosophical debate. In fact, there is a powerful tendency in Augustine scholarship to underline Augustine's role in the formation of some notions (such as self-consciousness, inner self and human will) that are strictly related with the idea of "subject" in the modern sense of the term.² It may seem very tempting for us to subscribe to a more or less simplistic version of this position and to base our overall argument on it. In this way, we may have the chance to announce Augustine as the forefather of the "modern subject" and baptize his work as the main source of the historical development that led to the formation of "subject-centered" readings of

¹ Note that we have already made a preliminary explanation about the meanings of "objective" and "subjective." See Chapter I.

² Some significant Augustine scholars argue that Augustine's philosophy gives an important place to the idea of self-knowledge and that it contains a version of the Cartesian *cogito*. The works of Bermon (2001), Matthews (1992) and Harrison (2006) concentrate on this idea. Another related position puts emphasis on the Augustinian notion of "inward turn" and finds in it the intimations of the modern idea of "inner self." Cary (2000) and Taylor (1992) follow this line of argument. Jean-Luc Marion, in Marion (2008), criticizes the view that Augustine has a *cogito*-like argument. Emmanuel Housset, in Housset (2008), puts stress on the differences between the Augustinian and the modern conceptions of inward turn.

tragedy. We may thereby act as if we have sufficient ground for making Augustine the central figure of the present work, which revolves around the notions of “objective” and “subjective” error.

However, we think that there are at least three reasons for not grounding our argument on the presupposition that Augustine is the forefather of the modern subject:

1. The positions of the scholars who find in Augustine’s thought the intimations of the modern subject are usually too complex to be classified under one heading. Arguably, none of these scholars would be willing to see Augustine as the “inventor” of the modern subject under its different guises. They rather point at a number of conceptual innovations in Augustine which may be relevant while working on the genealogy of some modern concepts related with subject. In this sense, it is extremely difficult -if not totally inadequate- to simply argue that Augustine *already* had a notion of subject and that this notion would later constitute the basis of the modern enterprises around this term.

2. Scholars who work on the similarities between certain elements of the Augustinian philosophy and those related with the notion of modern subject have usually put the emphasis on the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of the issue. Accordingly, they have usually tried to follow the traces of the ideas of “self-reflexivity” and “self-knowledge” in Augustine’s texts and argued that some sort of a “*cogito* argument” is found in Augustine. For our project, however, the problem of self-reflexivity does not have the same degree of importance. In fact, as the title of our project suggests, our focus is more on the Augustinian *morals*, and especially on the Augustinian *theory of sin*. From our standpoint, what is central is Augustine’s role in the

history of ethical (and tragic) problematizations. For this reason, although the Augustinian philosophy is highly relevant in discussing issues like self-knowledge, our emphasis will be more on the ethical notions like responsibility and freedom of choice. In other words, we are more interested in those aspects of the Augustinian philosophy that have contributed to the formation of the notion of “ethical subject.”

3. Lastly, we think that Augustine’s contribution to the history of ethics can by no means be reduced to the role that he played in the formation of concepts related to the idea of “ethical subject.” We *do* think that some of Augustine’s crucial conceptions - such as freedom of choice and will- prepare the ground for the modern idea of ethical subject. However, as we hope to show throughout the two chapters that follow, his theory comports other equally crucial elements that prevent us from conceiving him as the “inventor” of the modern subject.

This last point is especially important, primarily because it points towards a more proper way to relate Augustine to the history of *tragic* problematizations. As we will show, the very complexity and ambiguity of Augustine’s role in the later development of the notion of “subject” is what makes him relevant for understanding Renaissance and post-Renaissance tragedy. In fact, if Augustine were *simply* the founder of the modern ethical subject -and the initiator of the “subject-centered” outlook- it would be less interesting to consider his thought while reflecting on the notion of tragic error. In such a case, his role would be limited to carrying out the “subjectification” of the experience of tragic error and replacing it by what Kierkegaard calls ethical error. In other words, Augustine would be reduced to the anti-tragic philosopher *par excellence*, the chief responsible for the disappearance of tragedy as Kierkegaard’s “A” understands it.

However, we think that the complexity of Augustine's position in the history of ethical problematizations enables the researcher to give him an illuminative role for understanding the history of tragic problematizations. Our main objective in the next two chapters will be to present various aspects of this complex position.

Therefore, our use of the term "subjective" is not based on the conviction that Augustine has in fact invented the "subject." While using this adjective, our primary goal is to isolate certain elements in the Augustinian thought that are developed with a view to build an alternative to an "objective" conception of human error. In this sense, "subjective" is used here *primarily* as the counterpart of "objective," and not in relation with the philosophical notion of "subject" in the modern sense. This is the reason why we use the term "subjective" in quotation marks.

On the other hand, we think that the use of this adjective is further legitimized by the fact that our presentation of the Augustinian thought centers primarily on the question of human error, and only secondarily on the general way in which human agency or individuality is conceived by the thinker. As we hope to show in the following chapters, it may be rewarding to approach the Augustinian conception of sin by making use of the term "subjective." And we think that, *in this particular context*, it may be rewarding to have the modern resonances of the term in mind. While he builds up his position against the Manicheans' "objective" notion of error, Augustine introduces certain "subjective" elements that may be related with the modern idea of ethical subject. These aspects, we will argue, have played a significant role in the formation of "subject-centered" conceptions of tragedy.

Before moving on to our presentation of the Augustinian thought, it would be of great use to get acquainted with the context that gave rise to this multi-faceted and dynamic enterprise. A glance at the *Confessions* (which is Augustine's most popular text) is sufficient for us to realize the dynamic character of Augustine's philosophical career. The philosopher's early life is marked by a series of ruptures, discoveries and conversions which are parts of his never-ending search for truth. Indeed, the lands that witnessed Augustine's intellectual journey, i.e. the Roman Empire of the fourth and fifth centuries, provided a lively atmosphere for a passionate mind like that of Augustine's. The empire was officially Christian, but the enduring presence of Paganism was a highly determining social reality. Paganism was not simply a traditional belief-system that was gradually disappearing and becoming obsolete, but a concrete and highly influential intellectual dynamic. The Skepticism of the New Academy, the Neo-Platonism and the Ciceronian version of Stoicism were sufficiently present during Augustine's youth to shape the beginning of his brilliant intellectual career.

Moreover, Augustine lived in a period in which Christianity was still trying to ensure its dominance by struggling against its enemies and by minutely distinguishing its "orthodox" interpretations from heretic ones. A figure like Augustine, who had both a major position in the hierarchy of the Church and a resolute wish to search for truth, would indispensably become a central actor of this war. This is the reason why Augustine's career is not simply made up of a series of context-free theoretical inventions and elaborations, but also of a series of highly polemical texts contributing to the fervent controversies of his time. For this reason, heretic groups such as Manicheans,

Donatists and Pelagians, which were Augustine's three major enemies, played crucial roles in the formation of his thought.

Because of the dynamic environment that surrounded his personal development, the initial phases of Augustine's intellectual journey has been marked by a series of ruptures, which are of key importance for understanding the new world that his thought prepares. The philosopher's importance, in this sense, is not limited to his fundamental role in the history of Christianity and Christian philosophy. Augustine is unique insofar as his work does not only present the elements of a new paradigm, but also the process of its formation, its initial hesitations, its tensions and ambiguities.

Still, the critical role of Augustine for our project goes beyond the exceptional character of his historical significance. We think that Augustine's discussion on sin is highly relevant for the main problematic of our thesis, which pertains to the "objectivity" and "subjectivity" of human error. For this reason, despite the fact that tragedy and the related philosophical or literary problems were apparently out of its scope, Augustine's thought can be very illuminating while discussing the different versions of tragic problematization and tragic error.

Our discussion about Augustine's theory will be mainly focused on his ideas concerning human error, sin and culpability. In the following chapters, we will study the two major aspects of Augustine's complex theory of human error. These two aspects are represented by -but not limited to- the two major controversies that shaped Augustine's intellectual enterprise. The first one of these is the anti-Manichean controversy which is, very roughly put, Augustine's battle against a version of objectivity of error and his effort to prepare the ground for a new, "subjective" notion of error. The second moment

will comprise the anti-Pelagian controversy in which Augustine, while still retaining the main aspects of his earlier position, integrates some new, “objective” elements to his conception of human being and sin.

CHAPTER IV
AUGUSTINE AGAINST THE MANICHEANS: THE CHALLENGE OF
“OBJECTIVITY” AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
“SUBJECTIVE” ELEMENTS

One is often tempted to describe Augustine’s intellectual enterprise as a journey rather than a static system. This dynamism has a central biographical reason: This major Church father and thinker, who is unquestionably one of the most influential Christian figures of human history, did not grow up as a devout Christian. Born from a Christian mother and a pagan father in Thagaste (where Paganism was prevalent), a considerable part of Augustine’s youth passed among the Manicheans. As in the case of Paul, Augustine’s conversion into Christianity (beautifully narrated in his *Confessions*) is a dramatic turning point, the remarkable effects of which will continuously shape the future phases of his life. This conversion, however, is not an exclusively personal, psychological and religious turning-point: It represents a major philosophical rupture, influencing more than solely Augustine’s personal career. As we will attempt to show in the following pages, the philosophical aspects of this conversion points at a wider transformation in the way human error and evil are problematized in philosophy. We will clarify the extent to which this conversion is inseparable from the discovery of a new way of posing the problem of evil and a new strategy to deal with it. More specifically, we will argue that Augustine’s conversion to Christianity and his succeeding opposition against his former belief-system (i.e. Manichaeism) can be

understood as an effort to give a philosophical response to an “objective” conception of human error and to set the terrain for a more “subjective” notion.

Augustine and Manichaeism: The Problem of Objectivity of Error

Before his conversion to Christianity, Augustine spent nine years among the Manicheans, those “men, doting in their pride, too carnal-minded and glib of speech, in whose mouth was the snares of the devil” as he would later describe in *Confessions* 4. 10. When he met them, he had already read Cicero’s *Hortensius* and had been oriented towards the philosophical search for truth. For this reason, the Manichean period of Augustine should be understood more as an earlier phase of the future philosopher’s intellectual search for truth than an ordinary adventure of a confused young man. Indeed, Manichaeism was far from being a marginal esoteric sect attended by a limited group of fantasists. It was an extremely influential religious movement that succeeded to settle down a more or less systematic cosmology and an ethical project tightly related to it.¹ As such, Manichaeism contained much more than a set of “splendid fantasies” as Augustine would later call: It was an elaborate intellectual/ethical enterprise. For this reason, it is not surprising that it constituted a powerful option for an aspiring intellectual like Augustine.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the Manicheans appears in their attempt to answer one of the key questions of both monotheist and pagan theologies: What is the source of evil? Their answer is as famous as its Augustinian criticism: They thought that the universe is comprised of two basic substantial principles that are at war, i.e. the

¹ Hans Jonas suggests that “Mani’s is the only gnostic system which became a broad historical force, and the religion based on it must, in spite of its eventual downfall, be ranked among the major religions of mankind.” See Jonas (1992), p. 206.

principle of Light which is good and identified with God, and the principle of Darkness which is evil. These two principles, which had been separate in the beginning, were mixed with each other when the principle of Evil conquered one part of the Good.² This situation, they think, will continue until the day when the principle of Light will defeat the principle of Darkness and establish its eternal domination.

Through this cosmology, Manicheans explained good and evil with reference to two distinct metaphysical sources. From such a perspective, not only the human existence but also the whole realm of human values is considered as the direct prolongation of this cosmological state of affairs. Accordingly, the human good finds its source in the residual element of light that persists to exist in each human being. This residual element, which is the prolongation of Light, is the human soul. The body, on the other hand, is a part of the Darkness that imprisoned the other, good element. Manichean asceticism is based on the attempt to free the person from the bonds of carnal existence, to seek personal enlightenment and to thereby contribute to the victory of Light over Darkness. Hence the ethical enterprise is described on the basis of the metaphysical battle between good and evil as well as its prolongation in individual human beings.³ According to the resulting soteriology, the salvation of men would overlap with that of the universe.

It is not hard to recognize the major philosophical reasons for Augustine's entrapment by the "splendid fantasies" of these "carnal-minded" men: Their cosmology

² For an account of the Manichean cosmology with frequent references to original sacred texts, see Jonas (1992), pp. 209-236.

³ The following lines of Jonas describe this situation very clearly: "From now on the struggle between Light and Darkness concentrates upon man, who becomes the main prize and at the same time the main battlefield of the two contending parties. In him both sides have almost all their stakes: Light that of its own restoration, Darkness that of its very survival." See Jonas (1992), p. 227.

and ethics were based on the existence of a pure, immutable principle of Good to be protected against the assaults of the Evil. As such, they presented a very vivid description of the existing state of affairs and a concrete strategy to fight against it. Moreover, their worldview contained important elements that would be appealing to a mind such as Augustine's, which was already familiar with the Christian paradigm: First and foremost, Jesus constituted an important element of the Manichean worldview, even if he occupied a secondary position in comparison to Mani. Second, the Manicheans' use of the imagery of light was generally in line with that of the nascent Christianity and it helped Christians to imagine their God as inviolable and eternal -as Augustine would later do. Lastly, their presuppositions concerning the idea of ethical responsibility were mostly in harmony with the main precepts of the prevailing Christian position: The believer was subject to punishment, and repentance was a meaningful act for those who wanted to be saved.

In *Confessions*, as well as in his works which are usually grouped under the heading of "Anti-Manichean writings," Augustine's goal goes well beyond a criticism of Manicheans' arguments from a Christian standpoint. By pointing at the inconsistencies inherent to the Manichean worldview, Augustine also presents what may be called an "internal" criticism. It may be beneficial to remember three of Augustine's objections at this point:

1. Augustine's arguably most fundamental criticism targeted the Manichean idea that both of the grounding cosmic principles are of corporeal character. As the *Confessions* informs us, during his Manichean period Augustine was unable to imagine God as anything other than a "bright and vast body" and himself as "a particle of that

body.”⁴ He soon discovered the troubles that such a conception would cause him. Once he thought of God as a body that “stretched out through infinite space,” he was also compelled to accept that “there would be more of [God] in an elephant than in a sparrow, because one is larger than the other and fills a larger space.”⁵ Hence, attributing corporeality to God would lead Augustine to imagine Him as divisible and mutable. As a consequence, he would have to attribute to Him some imperfections that not only a Christian but also a Manichean would refrain from relating with God. Manicheans’ worldview was therefore marked by a fundamental inconsistency: They imagined God as a body and they conceived Him as “incorruptible and inviolable and immutable.”⁶ Getting rid of this inconsistency required a radical change of paradigm, a change that Augustine would later envisage thanks to his Platonist masters: He would attribute incorporeality to God.

2. An important ramification of this objection concerns the problem of Evil. For Augustine, the attribution of incorporeality to God would not be sufficient to amend the Manichean position, since it would still be possible to hold that Evil is a God-like substance, be it immaterial or not.⁷ Such a conception had the obvious advantage of saving the purity of God by attributing evil to another substance. But it has not been difficult for Augustine to realize that the supposition of such a substance cancels out God’s perfection, since it posits the existence of a substance outside God. Hence, not only the Manichean idea of corporeality, but also the famous Manichean dualism should

⁴ *Conf.* 4. 16 (31)

⁵ *ibid.*, 7. 1 (2)

⁶ *ibid.*, 7. 1 (1)

⁷ Menn (2001), p. 41

be abandoned. For this reason, Augustine thought that evil should be devoid of any ontological status and defined as absolute nothingness.⁸

3. Augustine's third major objection is essential for our discussion and it directly concerns the ethical paradigm of Manichaeism. For Augustine, explaining the source of evil acts with reference to the functioning of the dark principle in human beings leads to the demolition of the very foundation of a moral enterprise. Once we accept the existence of such a dark substantial principle, we tend to think that "it is not we who sin, but I-know-not-what other nature sins in us."⁹ Thus, any claim about human beings' responsibility for evil acts remains unfounded, with the obvious result that no logic of crime and punishment can be operative. In such a case, the idea of penitence, which is central for Manichean ethics, also loses its validity.¹⁰

As we have announced in Chapter II, what is crucial from our standpoint is the *structural parallelism* between Augustine's anti-Manichean position and Plato's and Aristotle's anti-tragic approaches. From an ethical standpoint, we think that Augustine's third criticism follows the spirit of Plato's and Aristotle's "anti-tragic" projects, in the sense that it tries to get rid of any "objective" basis in explaining and justifying the existence of human evil. What is unacceptable for Augustine is the preference to conceive the source of evil-doing as the operation of an "other in the self," in a way that reminds us of the way tragic malefactors such as *atê* function in Greek tragedies. The Manichean idea of human action, like its tragic counterpart, is based on a conception that sees human agent as an open field in which non-human forces may at times be at

⁸ *Conf.* 7.12 (18), *De lib. arb.* 2.20.

⁹ *Conf.* 5.10 (18)

¹⁰ These points are discussed in Augustine's "anti-Manichean" writings. See especially *Con. Fort.* 17 and 20; *De Duabus* 14, 15 and 22.

play. Insofar as it sees human evil as the consequence of a superhuman entity having a manipulative power over agents, the Manichean notion of evil is close to the objective notion of error that we find in Greek tragedies. Moreover, the way it threatens the foundations of a philosophically consistent ethics is also reminiscent of the tragic objectivity, against which Plato and Aristotle fought. Like Plato and Aristotle, Augustine attempts to construct a reasonable ethical system by defeating any worldview which sees evil as the product of an objective, cosmic element.

In this sense, we think that it is suitable to see Augustine's struggle against the Manicheans as a struggle against objectivity. It is no coincidence that in this struggle, Augustine's greatest source of inspiration has been Plotinus, probably the most important follower of the first great anti-tragic philosopher Plato. As we will show in the subsequent pages, the "Platonists" have been Augustine's main reference-point while building an alternative conception of evil.

The Plotinian Turn and the Perseverance of Objectivity

Augustine's first enlightenment that follows his reading of Cicero is of primary importance, since it leads the future Christian father to realize the significance of the philosophical search for truth and of the particular way of life that supports it. However, it is after reading the works of the "Platonists" that Augustine begins to build an elaborate philosophical position. The reading of "certain books of the Platonists, translated from the Greek language into Latin"¹¹ will lead him to a veritable enlightenment, the effects of which will be observed during his entire career.

¹¹ *Conf.* 7. 9 (13).

The *Confessions* show clearly how Platonism wakened Augustine from his post-Manichean slumbers. When, probably in the year 386,¹² he discovered the works of Plotinus, he had already abandoned the sect of Mani. This was the period in which the position of the skeptics (who maintained the impossibility for human beings to reach any certain truth) had been attractive for Augustine's confused mind.¹³ Although a considerable part of his doubts vis-à-vis Christianity were removed during his education by Ambrose, the question of evil was still without answer.¹⁴ The reading of the Platonists (probably Plotinus and Porphyry)¹⁵ would lead Augustine to a significant paradigm-shift by enabling him to envision a new solution for the problem of evil. Although his relation with the Manicheans had finished a long time ago, it is only after reading Plotinus that he became able to present a powerful alternative to their argument.

Plotinus and Incorporeality

As the *Confessions* clearly show, the most important contribution of the Platonists to Augustine has been to enable him to attribute incorporeality to both God and the human soul. Augustine was highly inspired by the Platonists' clear-cut division between intelligible and sensible realms, as well as by their theory about the complex, mixed character of human existence.

It may be helpful to remind here the Plotinian formulation of the division between intelligible and sensible realms, as well as the anthropological and ethical

¹² Brown (2001), p. 117

¹³ *Conf.* 5. 10 (19).

¹⁴ Menn (1998), p. 131.

¹⁵ For an outline of the discussions concerning what Augustine has read from the Platonists, see Cary (2000), pp. 33-35.

implications of such a division: For Plotinus, existence should be explained with recourse to three hypostases, which are the three basic principles. “One” (or “*the Good*”), which is the first existent (*En.* VI. 9. 2.), and by which all beings are beings (VI. 9. 1.), is the ultimate grounding principle of Plotinus’ ontology. Insofar as it is beyond any determinate form, One is not a being, but rather the ground of being; and it gives form to the second hypostasis that flows from it. This second hypostasis is the *Nous*, the always active (V. 1. 12.) intelligence that “contains the archetype of the cosmos and is itself the intelligible realm” (V. 9. 9). Emanating from the One, it in turn generates the Soul, which is the third hypostasis. Considered by Plotinus as the “word and deed of the *Nous*” (V. 1. 6), the Soul is the author of all existing things (*En.* V. 1. 2.), in the sense that it communicates the forms that it receives from the *Nous* to inferior elements (*En.* IV. 3. 12) that comprise the cosmos. It is, for that matter, the act of the *Nous* by which a further level of existence is produced (V. 1. 3.). Since it is inferior to the *Nous* and since it derives from it, it does not have the highest level of perfection (V. 1. 3.). It is changeable (V. 9. 4.), and the sensible things are generated by its lowest act (IV. 8. 7).

For Plotinus, then, the sensible comes into being as the product of the process of emanation that begins from the One and reaches its limit in the lowest act of the Soul. But the creation of the sensible realm leads to a complex philosophical problem, since it is not easy to envision the relation between the incorporeal Soul and its corporeal product without falling into contradiction.

For Plotinus, what is primarily important here is to save the purity of the hypostasis Soul. To this end, Plotinus differentiates between the two aspects of the

hypostasis Soul, namely (1) the World-Soul, which is responsible for the coming-into-being and maintenance of the sensible universe and (2) individual souls, which are responsible for the production and maintenance of individual living beings. These two aspects of the World-Soul are differentiated on the basis of their respective modes of relation with matter. The World-Soul governs the material universe without “descending” to it, while the individual souls are directly in touch with bodies that they govern. In other words, the contact of the emanation Soul with matter happens only in the lowest level of it where individual souls are at work. The individual souls are further divided into their higher and lower aspects on the basis of their mode of functioning while governing the bodies. The individual soul, accordingly, has different levels: Its highest level participates in the intellectual activity of the Soul, while its lowest level is preoccupied with the maintenance of the body attached to it.

Since it suggests that only the individual soul is stained by bodily existence, this distinction may help Plotinus to save the purity of the hypostasis Soul. But it does not solve the crucial problem that concerns the relation between the incorporeal soul and the corporeal body: In what sense is the individual soul *in contact* with matter? Is it entrapped by it, as the Gnostics would hold? Plotinus’ solution to this problem consists of changing the terms of the relation: The Soul -encapsulating the individual souls situated in its lowest level- is what produces the bodies. If that is the case, it is not really the individual soul which is “in” the body, but the body which is “in” the soul (*En.* VI. 4. 2). However, the “in” clause does not refer to a spatial existence, but rather to an ontological dependence: The body is “in” the soul, in the sense that material reality

depends on immaterial being.¹⁶ Hence, while explaining the relation between incorporeal beings and corporeal ones, one should refrain from being captivated by categories that belong to corporeality.

Here, the image of light provides Plotinus the opportunity to describe the essential mode of the relation that exists between incorporeal and corporeal beings. In various occasions, he explains the way the soul is *present to* the body by referring to the way light is *present to* air:

[T]he light penetrates through and through, but nowhere coalesces; the light is the stable thing, the air flows in and out; when the air passes beyond the lit area it is dark; under the light it is lit: we have a true parallel to what we have been saying of body and soul, for the air is in the light quite as much as the light in the air (*En. IV. 3. 22*).

If we imagine the soul as a light, and its influence on bodies as that of the irradiation of light on things, we can explain how the immaterial soul can affect the bodies without being immersed in them. Later in the same treatise (*En. IV. 4. 29*), Plotinus substitutes the image of light by that of heat, thinking that it is a more proper image.

Light or heat are surely good images helping one to envision the soul-body relation, but they do not explain how the individual soul can know what happens in bodies, or how, as Plotinus argues elsewhere, the lower parts of the soul are influenced by bodily existence.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the fact that this explanation is far from being satisfactory does not undermine its philosophical significance. It is important to see the range of possibilities that is open to Plotinus once he attributes incorporeality to his higher ontological principles (i.e. the three hypostases) as well as the lower principles that flow from them (i.e. the World-Soul and the individual souls). Such a conception

¹⁶ O'meara (1995), p. 26

¹⁷ Blumenthal (1996), p. 86.

enables one to imagine a stratified ontology, in which higher elements can generate or affect inferior ones without losing their essential nature. Augustine was willing to accept this idea, since it offered him a very fruitful model for explaining the relation between God and particular souls.

Incorporeality and the Problem of Evil in Augustine

Augustine did not try to integrate the three hypostases into his philosophy, because the basic precepts of the Christian doctrine led him elsewhere. Since he was ready to accept the creation *ex nihilo*, he did not (and could not) make use of the Plotinian idea of procession, which is central for understanding the coming into being of the second and third hypostases, as well as other inferior beings. However, as we have already said, Augustine owed to Plotinus the possibility to imagine his God as incorporeal. Before his Plotinian turn, Augustine had no other choice than equating incorporeality to nothingness:

And when I desired to meditate on my God, I did not know what to think of but a huge extended body -for what did not have bodily extension did not seem to me to exist- and this was the greatest and almost the sole cause of my unavoidable errors.¹⁸

Once, having read the Platonists, Augustine accepted the category of incorporeal existence, a new conception of God became possible for him. When he conceived God as incorporeal, it became possible for him to identify the Creator with Truth, i.e. with a kind of “food which is never divided” and something “common to all at the same time.”¹⁹ From that moment on, Augustine’s search for truth (initiated by Cicero’s call for

¹⁸ *Conf.* 5. 19

¹⁹ *De lib. arb.* 2. 14

the philosophical way of life) became inseparable from a search for the traces of the incorporeal Truth in sensible beings:

By having thus read the books of the Platonists, and having been taught by them to search for the incorporeal Truth, I saw how thy invisible things are understood through the things that are made.²⁰

A revolutionary consequence of this discovery is observable in the way Augustine envisages the relation between God and the human soul. By conceiving both of those as incorporeal, Augustine ceased to formulate their relation as the one between a part and the whole. God and soul belong to different ontological levels, due to the fact that the former is the ultimate source of everything existing, including the latter. Consequently, the soul's lack of perfection is the natural result of its position in the ontological hierarchy, according to which the created one is dependent on the Creator. And since the created belongs to an inferior ontological stratum, its lack of perfection has no effect on God's absolute perfection.

Here, the image of light is of great help to Augustine. As we have already explained, Plotinus made use of this image in order to elucidate how the World-Soul and the higher parts of the individual soul affect bodies without being affected by them. In Augustine's case, the image of light had a different function. Since his ontology did not suppose the existence of anything like the Plotinian Soul, i.e. an intermediary basic principle that would establish the relation between God and matter, he did not have to deal with the same problem as Plotinus'. Nevertheless, the image of light was a good way to formulate the relationship between God and His creatures, be them corporeal or incorporeal.

²⁰ *Conf.* 7. 20. (26)

A famous passage from the *Confessions* clearly shows how the idea of incorporeality can be explained by using the image of light:

And being admonished by these books to return into myself, I entered into my inward soul, guided by thee. This I could do because thou wast my helper. And I entered, and with the eye of my soul -such as it was- saw above the same eye of my soul and above my mind the Immutable Light. It was not the common light, which all flesh can see; nor was it simply a greater one of the same sort, as if the light of day were to grow brighter and brighter, and flood all space. It was not like that light, but different, yea, very different from all earthly light whatever. Nor was it above my mind in the same way as oil is above water, or heaven above earth, *but it was higher, because it made me, and I was below it, because I was made by it.* He who knows the Truth knows that Light, and he who knows it knows eternity.²¹

As this passage shows, the image of light enabled Augustine to use spatial references without being entrapped by the perils of materialism. Augustine could thus use the powerful image of Light, so precious for Manicheans, in order to put forward a new mode of relation between God and the human soul. The Light is higher, not in a spatial but in an ontological sense: It brings things into being.

Once God and his relation with souls are conceived differently, there arises for Augustine the possibility to reconsider the problem of evil in new terms. As the *Confessions* show, Augustine is quite explicit about the connection between the corporeal conception of God and the Manichean solution to the problem of evil. As a result of his earlier, corporeal conception of God, he says, he had to think of evil as a substance having its own “foul and hideous mass.”²² After his Plotinian turn, the acceptance of the incorporeal nature of God armed Augustine with the key idea of Platonic theodicy: Evil is not a being, but a privation of being.

²¹ *Conf.* 7. 10. (16) - my emphasis

²² *ibid.*, 5. 10 (20)

In various occasions, Plotinus explicitly says that evil is non-being (*En.* II. 4. 16, II. 5. 4, III. 6. 7). Augustine will be willing to adopt this basic Platonist principle and make it the keystone of his theodicy. Accordingly, the problem of evil will be formulated as a problem of ontological ground: Evil is the outcome of a being's detachment from its ontological basis and its fall into non-being. In human beings, therefore, evil will arise when the individual soul loses its relation with the higher principle that sustains it. Therefore, in contrast to Manicheans' way of putting it (the argument that the evil committed by the human soul arises from an active, external force), the evil derives from the soul's turning away from its source.

Once the relation between a human being and his Creator is conceived in this way, the complementary notions *aversio* and *conversio* become central to Augustinian ethics. In various occasions, Augustine defines sin as *aversio Dei*, in other words, as the soul's turning away from God. Conversion, in such a context, is the return of the individual soul to its Creator, who is also its ontological ground.²³ In Augustine's thought, the centrality of the *aversio-conversio* pair is interconnected with the idea that the human being is able to determine his/her position vis-à-vis God. As we will see, Augustine's entire ethical enterprise (which revolves around the notions of will and freedom of choice) is based on this conception of incorporeality and the particular mode of relation that it supports. However, before moving on to the novelties that Augustine's philosophy brings about, we shall examine the points in which he diverges from Plotinus' way.

²³ From a Christian point of view, therefore, conversion is not simply a radical change in the belief system of the person, but it involves also the specific act of turning towards the immutable light of God. Augustine's conversion to Christianity, in this sense, is the only true conversion that is narrated in *Confessions*, since all of the preceding phases of Augustine's intellectual and religious journey were experienced during his period of *aversio Dei*.

Objectivity and the Limits of Plotinus

Although the discovery of Platonism by Augustine had revolutionary consequences, its impact could not go beyond the limits set by the main principles of Christian orthodoxy. For Augustine, the ideas of the Platonists were valuable only insofar as they helped him to solidify his belief in Christianity and to eliminate certain serious philosophical doubts.²⁴ For this reason, to see the points of rupture between Augustine's Christian worldview and Plotinus' philosophy may offer us a better understanding of the Augustinian enterprise.

As we have shown above, the Plotinian turn armed Augustine with precious theoretical tools for defeating the Manichean version of objectivity of error. Both Plotinus and Augustine were convinced that the human soul was not a part of a corporeal cosmic substance and that human evil was not to be attributed solely to an extra-human nature. In this level of generalization, there seems to be no crucial disagreement between them. But once we have a more detailed account of Plotinus' theodicy, we realize its distance from a more or less consistent Christian worldview as that of Augustine.

From Augustine's standpoint, Plotinus' solution was obviously better than the Manicheans', since it did not assume the existence of an evil substance. In fact, Plotinus himself was disturbed by the popularity of the Gnostic sects of his time, and he wrote a full treatise against them.²⁵ As a loyal Platonist, he could not accept the Gnostic principle according to which the material world itself is the product of an evil nature. Following *Timaeus*, he suggested that the material world was the product of God and

²⁴ Cary (2000), pp. 33-35.

²⁵ *Enneads* II. 9, also known as "Against the Gnostics"

that it was full of the glory of its maker.²⁶ His reaction to the Gnostics may therefore largely satisfy Christian creationism.

The problem with the Plotinian theodicy for a Christian like Augustine is, in a sense, its lack of radicalism. For Augustine, the proper solution to the problem of theodicy should completely discharge the Creator from any responsibility for the existence of evil. However, there is no doubt that Plotinus' theory of matter leads him to accept an objective conception of evil that conflicts with the basic theological implications of Christian creationism. In fact, although he cherishes the material world because it flows from the three hypostases, he also states that matter is evil. This discovery, for Plotinus, is the logical consequence of his conception of good, which is qualified as self-sufficient and beyond measure, and considered as the measure and term of all (*En. I. 8. 2*). Following this way of thinking, there should also be something which is dependent on other things, measureless, formless and imperfect, i.e. something that may be defined as non-being (*En. I. 8. 3*). For Plotinus, matter, which is situated in the lowest rank of the ontological hierarchy, has this status of non-being, and is thereby equated with evil.²⁷ Furthermore, it is not one evil among others, but the Absolute or Primal Evil, since the lack of measure and form are its essential qualities. Other things are considered to be evil only by having a certain kind of relation with it (*En. I. 8. 3*): Bodies, since they are formed matter, and individual souls, since they may become associated with matter, are such secondary evils derived from the Primal Evil (*En. I. 8. 4*).

²⁶ Rist (1967), p. 112.

²⁷ Note that the Platonic category of "non-being" does not refer to a state of complete non-existence. It is rather a formless, potential existence that needs actualization by gaining a particular form.

To the extent that he accepts the existence of an absolute, metaphysical notion of evil,²⁸ Plotinus seems to be closer to the Gnostics than he is to the Christian worldview. For both Plotinus and the Gnostics, evil has an extra-human existence, from which its human version is derived. But it is important to realize that supposing the existence of an objective, metaphysical principle of evil does not lead the Platonist to the same problem of theodicy as the one that would embarrass a Christian like Augustine. For the latter, the acceptance of a metaphysical principle of evil would lead to a dead-end: He should accept either that God has created evil, or that God is limited by an external evil substance, just as the Manichean would hold. But Plotinus, while refraining from the second alternative, has the possibility to embrace a modified version of the former. In other words, he can suggest that there is some sort of a relation between the absolute Good -the One- and the absolute Evil. His ontology does not compel him to admit that the One is *responsible* for the existence of evil, since it did not *create* it in the same way as the biblical God created the world. The existence of matter, for Plotinus, is an “implication” of the emanation process. Matter is “what is ‘there’ when nothing is there, when the emanation process finally runs out.”²⁹ It is not an active force created by the One, but the lowest, purely negative mode of existence that flows from it. It is, in a sense, the necessary end of the procession from the One.

Augustine, as a Christian, had to build a completely new strategy. Since his ontology was creationist, he was compelled to present a different formulation of the connection between God and the existence of Evil. Since God created everything *ex*

²⁸ O’meara (1995), p. 82.

²⁹ Rist (1967), pp. 117-118.

nihilo, and since everything he created is good insofar as it is, matter cannot be evil.³⁰ In other words, Augustine's evil, defined as the privation of being, cannot be associated with matter, which is considered as a being despite the fact that it has the lowest degree of perfection. Augustine's ontology diverges from Plotinus' in that his God's creation cannot encompass any created reality which will be qualified as non-being. Hence, the existence of evil should imply the possibility of certain existent things (created by God) to become deprived of being. This idea constitutes the basis of Augustine's conception of human will and freedom of choice, which will occupy us in the forthcoming sections.

However, Plotinus' theory of evil is complex, in the sense that it does not explain human evil with exclusive reference to its metaphysical source, which is matter. This kind of direct derivation would in fact ruin the foundations of Plotinus' ethics by making his position close to that of Gnostics, which he criticized fervently. It is true that for Plotinus, human evil is the outcome of individual soul's contact with body, which is - insofar as it is formed matter- a secondary evil. However, his ontological presuppositions prevent him from going too far in deriving human evil from metaphysical evil. For him, matter itself cannot be conceived as an active cosmic force that can entrap a part of the soul, as the Manicheans' dark substance would do. If the individual soul is in contact with matter, it should have its own responsibility in this. Therefore, the Plotinian theory of evil should do more than simply positing a metaphysical principle of evil. It should also explain *the reason why* individual souls are in contact with matter, to such an extent that they become immersed in evil.

³⁰ *Conf.* 7. 12 (18). The last lines of the very first section of the first book of the Bible clearly express this idea: "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day" (Genesis 1:32 - Authorized King James Version).

This is what Plotinus attempts to do in his much-debated theory of “descent of the souls” presented in *Enneads* IV.8. Here, Plotinus shows that the determining factor in human evil is not the existence of matter (although it is indispensable), but the nature of the relation that the individual soul establishes with it. In the case of the World-Soul, situated on the same ontological level with individual souls, the responsibility for the production and the organization of matter does not lead to evil. On the basis of this idea, Plotinus criticizes the Gnostic attitude that sees this act of the World-Soul as evil. For him, even if the World-Soul is in a sense responsible for the coming-into-being of matter, it is able to guard its purity: It “proceeds by purely intellectual act as in the execution of an artistic conception” (*En.* 4.8.8). In fulfilling its function, the World-Soul does not *descend* into matter, but it illuminates it. Hence, it does not become immersed in it and it can thereby stay unstained by evil (*En.* IV. 8. 2).³¹ While producing and governing matter, it acts as good as its ontological status permits.

The same is not the case for individual souls. It is true that their contact with matter is not bad in itself, since they also give form to it -which is good. But individual souls, unlike the World-Soul, are likely to turn this contact into a relation of bondage, and this is where human evil arises. The World-Soul, whose sole relation with matter is to enlighten it, never loses its essential link with the *Nous*. It does not penetrate deeply into a body and it never depends on it (*En.* IV. 8. 2). However, individual souls (or more correctly *some* of them) deviate from their essential function by becoming partial and self-centered (*En.* IV. 8. 4). And when an individual soul stays in this state for a long

³¹ For these points, see Rist (1967), pp. 115-117.

time, its “vision is no longer set in the Intellectual” and it becomes a “partial thing, isolated, weakened, full of care, intent upon the fragment” (*En.* IV. 8. 4. 13-15).

What this means is that while matter is the necessary cause of human evil, it is not its sufficient cause.³² Matter is the source of weakness, but not all kinds of souls that enter into contact with it end up by being evil. Evil arises when an individual soul builds a particular sort of relation with matter. It is, in a sense, the outcome of the intersection of two necessary causes, i.e. (i) the existence of matter and (ii) the tendency of *some* souls to be immersed in matter.³³

Here we can observe both the affinity and the distance between Augustine and Plotinus. As we will see, the idea that some souls become immersed in matter because of their self-centeredness inspired Augustine’s theory of pride [*superbia*] and the related idea of human sin, defined as *aversio Dei*. But for Augustine, *aversio Dei* should be the *only* cause of human evil, and the existence of matter cannot play any direct role in its production. For him, what matters is only human being’s attitude towards matter, which is ultimately good in itself. Evil, for Augustine, does not arise when human being is immersed in absolute non-being (which Plotinus would equate with matter), but when, having lost its link with God, it becomes deprived of being.

Augustine’s rupture from Plotinus can therefore be described as an effort to do away with the objectivity of evil by focusing on the “subjective” aspects of human experience. This is the reason why Augustine will need a new notion of *voluntas* and a

³² Rist (1974), p. 501

³³ O’Brien (1996), p. 186: “It is only the conjunction of the soul’s own excessive eagerness and of the presence of matter that will prove to be sufficient cause of evil in the soul.” Note that O’Brien criticizes John M. Rist’s position in Rist (1967, p. 506), according to which the existence of these two causes leads to an inconsistency that Augustine will try to solve by eliminating the role of matter.

new conception of ethics which gives an undeniable role to the idea of freedom of choice. The way he elaborated these notions and took distance from an objective understanding of human error will be the subject-matter of the last section of the present chapter. But before that, we will briefly dwell on another important concept that may deepen our understanding of the Augustinian ethical enterprise: interiority. We think that the consideration of this term will help us to understand the degree in which Augustine changed the main tenets of the ethical project that he inherited from his Platonist masters.

Inward Turn and the “Privacy” of the Augustinian Inner Space

In many respects, Augustine’s ethical project is a part of the ancient philosophical enterprise dominated by the idea of the “care of the self.” Michel Foucault, in his later works, pointed at the centrality of this notion for understanding the particular conception of human experience that ancients had. As Foucault presents it, the Greek “*epimelei heautou*” (“care for your self”) and its Latin version “*cura sui*” constitute the key elements of the prehistory of modern conceptions of self, individuality and subjectivity. Foucault argues that the history of this notion can be traced back to Socrates’ *Apology* (29d),³⁴ and that the term, together with the set of notions and practices surrounding it, gained centrality and became a “cultural phenomenon” in Hellenistic times.³⁵ Through what Foucault calls “practices of the self,” various schools of philosophy put forward new modes in which a human being relates himself to his/her acts and to his/her self. Exercises of abstinence, examination of conscience or the conversion towards one’s self

³⁴ Foucault (2005), p. 5.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 9

have been important elements of this new mode of relation. These practices largely inspired the rising Christian culture and shaped significantly what Foucault calls “the history of subjectivity.”³⁶

A central aspect of the culture of the self has been the overvaluation of the human soul as opposed to “external” beings. On this basis, the idea of turning towards one’s self has become a common theme in various practices of the self since Plato. Two important characteristics of this idea of turning towards the self should be remembered so that Augustine’s contribution to this culture becomes clearly noticeable:

i. The pre-Augustinian turn towards the self did not always take the form of an “inward turn.”³⁷ And in cases in which it took this form, it did not lead to the institution of a “private” inner space, as we will show through the fruitful example of Plotinus. What was critical for these practices of the self was not the opening up of an inner world of experience, but rather a meticulous preoccupation with the soul considered as an objective component of the human being.³⁸

ii. In many significant cases, caring for the self was not considered as the ultimate goal of the turn towards it. In an article in which he presents his reaction to Foucault’s conception of “practices of the self,”³⁹ Pierre Hadot criticizes the

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 10-11.

³⁷ It is interesting to see how in one of his seminars Michel Foucault hesitated to name the turn towards one’s self as an inward turn: “Being concerned about oneself implies that we look away from the outside to... I was going to say ‘inside’. Let’s leave to one side this word, which you can well imagine raises a host of problems, and just say that we must convert our looking from the outside, from others and the world etc., towards ‘oneself’.” Foucault (2005), p. 11.

³⁸ Jean-Pierre Vernant, in his article titled “The Individual within the City-State,” compares the Platonic notion of the soul and the concept of “ego” that will later be introduced: “The *psuchê* is truly Socrates but not Socrates’ “ego,” not the psychological Socrates. The *psuchê* is in each of us an impersonal or suprapersonal entity. It is *the* soul in me and not *my* soul.” See Vernant (1991), p. 330. On this subject, see also Daraki (1989), p. 201.

³⁹ “Réflexions sur la notion de culture de soi” in Hadot (2002), pp. 323-332.

Foucauldian overemphasis on the notion of self, or more correctly on a “certain conception of the self.”⁴⁰ Hadot, -whose notion of “philosophical exercises” had a significant influence on Foucault- was by no means willing to undermine the importance of the idea of the “turn towards oneself,” which, according to him, was especially central for the Stoic and the neo-Platonist schools. He is in agreement with Foucault in that the goal of the turn towards the self was the liberation from exteriority, the prevention of a wrong mode of attachment to objects and pleasures, and the maintenance of the required degree of self-possession. But Hadot thinks that this turn had other goals than the simple well-being of the self. He says:

I [...] think that this movement of interiorization is inseparably linked to another movement, whereby one rises to a higher psychic level, at which one encounters another kind of exteriorization, another relationship with “the exterior.” This is a new way of being-in-the-world, which consists in becoming aware of oneself as a part of nature, and a portion of universal reason.⁴¹

Hadot’s remarks are of prime importance for our purposes, since they underline one significant aspect of the ancient conception of the self as well as the theories and practices that sustain it: The idea of “inward turn” is a central part of some of the ancient ethical projects, but the ultimate goal of such a turn is the realization of the commonness of one’s nature with that of what is beyond. In a sense, the true objective of the turn towards the self is the ultimate incorporation of it to a higher principle.⁴²

⁴⁰ Hadot (2002), p. 324.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 330. The English translation is taken from Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase, Blackwell, 1996, p. 211.

⁴² Jean-Pierre Vernant, in the article that we already quoted in note 38, continues as follows: “The individual soul therefore does not convey a man’s individual psychology but rather the aspiration of an individual subject to become one with the all, reintegrated into the general cosmic order.” See Vernant (1991), p. 330.

For different reasons, neither Foucault nor Hadot refer to Christian writers when they discuss the notion of “culture of the self.”⁴³ Nevertheless, we think that Foucault’s description of “culture of the self” and Hadot’s criticism of it should be kept in mind, if we are to comprehend Augustine’s position in the history of ethical enterprises. The different philosophical schools that dominated Augustine’s age and that largely contributed to his intellectual development proposed various strategies through which the acting agent cares for his/her self. And there would be no mistake in considering Augustinian ethics as a project aiming to reform and to largely criticize some key aspects of the existing schools. However, Augustine’s contribution to the “culture of the self” was by no means limited to proposing new practices. He made a much deeper contribution to this culture by developing a radically new way of conceiving the human self: On the one hand, he shifted the focus from the human soul, taken as an “objective” category, to the inner experience of the person. And in parallel to this change of focus, he put forward a theory of inward turn in which the turn towards the self does not lead to the incorporation of it to a higher principle.

In the pages that follow, we will point at the differences between Plotinus’ and Augustine’s contributions to the “culture of the self.” By briefly examining their respective theories of inward turn, we will underline the significance of Augustine’s rupture from his Platonist predecessor.

⁴³ In fact, if Foucault could publish the fourth volume of *History of Sexuality*, we would probably have a better account of his ideas on Christianity’s role in the development of the notion of self.

Plotinus' Inward Turn

Both Plotinus and Augustine share the basic Platonist principle according to which the search of the individual soul for truth should not be limited to the material realm. Since the soul -like God- has an incorporeal nature, and since what is incorporeal has a higher ontological status than what is corporeal, the search for truth should take place within the soul itself. This brings about the notion of inward turn, a notion to which Plotinus, and following him Augustine will give a central place in their philosophies. For both thinkers, the possibility of reaching God through inward turn is based on the ontological affinity between individual souls and God. However, their similarity ends here. The radical differences in the ways in which they describe this affinity and conceive the soul led them to different ways of conceiving this inward turn.

What is central for Plotinus' notion of individual soul is that it is always conceived as the instantiation of the emanation Soul. In other words, individuality is not seen as an intrinsic characteristic of the human soul, but rather as the consequence of the lower activity of the emanation Soul. As Plotinus says, while the emanation Soul continues to dwell in the *Nous* from which it proceeds, it also has to participate in the sensible realm (*En. IV.8.7*). When individual living bodies are produced by the Soul, each one of them receives an individual "soul," or rather an individual image of the emanation Soul.⁴⁴ In this way, "there is one identical soul dispersed among many bodies" and "one soul is expanded in a multiplicity of souls" (*En. IV.9.4*).

As we have already suggested above, this account brings with it a multiplicity of problems that continuously preoccupy Plotinus. What is crucial from our standpoint is

⁴⁴ Menn (1998), p. 121

the following: In Plotinus' account, the link between the individual soul and the emanation Soul does not disappear completely (*En.* IV.8.8.), since the former is in reality an instantiation of the latter. It is true that the individual soul's immersion in material life may lead it to omit its essential affinity with the emanation Soul.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, even when the individual soul is completely immersed in matter, it still has a part that is "permanently in the intelligible" (*En.* IV. 8. 8). Thus, the possibility for the individual soul to regain its "authentic" status by returning to the higher principles is never completely lost. In fact, this possibility constitutes the very foundation of Plotinus' ethics: The ultimate goal of a human being is to enable his soul to realize its true nature and to raise itself to its authentic level of being. The Plotinian idea of ascent is therefore based on this essential affinity between the individual soul and the higher principles.

For Plotinus, inward turn constitutes the starting-point of this ascent. By turning to itself, the soul escapes from the material world in which it is immersed and takes cognizance of its true nature. Following this, the soul elevates itself to the level of higher principles, which constitute its ontological ground. In this sense, the inward turn is primarily the beginning of the individual soul's ascent into higher principles, i.e. Soul, *Nous* and the One. A famous passage from the *Enneads* clearly exhibits this point:

Many times, awakened to myself away from the body, becoming outside all else and within myself, seeing a wonderful and great beauty, believing myself then especially to be part of the higher realm, in act as the best life, *having become one with the divine* and based in it advancing to that activity, establishing myself above all other intelligible beings, then going down from this position in the divine, from intellect down to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I could ever, and now, descend, and how my soul has come to be in the body. (*En.* IV. 8. 1)⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Hadot (1963) p. 23-39 .

⁴⁶ We use here the translation that O'meara gives in O'meara (1995), p. 104. The emphasis is ours.

Hence, the realization of the true nature of the soul leads us to the recognition that it authentically belongs to the realm of *Nous*. And due to the essential characteristic of *Nous*, this realization takes place beyond the limits of ordinary discursive knowledge. The soul, in this level, does not only *know* or *think of* the *Nous*, but it also realizes that it is *one with it*. And once the level of *Nous* is reached, the soul has the possibility to reach the ultimate principle, which is the One.

Hence, the Plotinian inward turn is the beginning of a genuine odyssey during which the soul regains its authentic ontological position by having access to the higher foundational principles and by being one with them. As the famous treatise entitled “Beauty” (*En. I. 6*) suggests, the withdrawal into oneself is also some kind of a flight, the aim of which is to reach “the beloved Fatherland,” i.e. “there whence we have come.”⁴⁷ This is the reason why Dean Inge, in his much-appreciated formula, considers Plotinus’ soul as a wanderer, an entity which travels within and across experience, and avoids conceiving it as a fixed center of experience.⁴⁸

Augustine and the “Private” Inner Space

We have already cited the passage from *Confessions* 7.10 (16) where Augustine, having read the Platonists, turns to himself and enters his inward soul. Here, as in Plotinus, the inward turn marks the beginning of a journey that will ideally end up in some sort of a contact with the truth. However, Augustine’s conception of human soul leads him to a

⁴⁷ *En. I. 6. 8*. Note that here, Plotinus refers to Odysseus’ return to his homeland Ithaca.

⁴⁸ Georges Leroux refers to Inge’s formula in Leroux (1996), p. 305. Note that Inge’s formula has nevertheless the risk of leading us to conceive individuality as an essential characteristic of the human soul. We think that the soul may be considered as a wanderer only from an all-too-human standpoint, i.e. from the standpoint of the individualized soul.

significant deviation from the path of his Platonist master and pushes him to adopt a different understanding of inner experience.

The main reason behind this rupture is the difference in Augustine's way of conceiving the human soul. As we have already noted, Augustine follows the Platonist tradition in attributing incorporeality to soul. However, he diverges significantly from his masters in the way he formulates the nature of the relation between the soul and God. Although some of his early writings are marked by an inclination -probably inspired by Plotinus- to see God and the soul as inseparable,⁴⁹ he modifies his position afterwards. Beginning with *De moribus ecclesiae*, Augustine suggests that his creationist ontology does not permit him to conceive God as the "Fatherland" of the soul. According to him, the fact that both human soul and God are incorporeal should not lead us to overlook the rigid distinction of *creator* and *creature*.⁵⁰ The soul did not "come from" God, but it was "created" by Him.⁵¹ Hence, the abyss that exists between God and the soul is not the outcome of an individual soul's radical illusion, but of its essential ontological status: Unlike its Plotinian counterpart, the Augustinian soul has no divine quality.

The existence of such an ultimate abyss between God and soul has crucial consequences for the goal and the nature of the Augustinian inward turn. The Christian believer may strive to reach his God, but he/she can have no claim to "become" divine by being one with the higher principles:

Following after God is the desire of happiness; to reach God is happiness itself. We follow after God by loving Him; we reach Him, not by becoming entirely what He is, but in nearness to Him, and in wonderful and

⁴⁹ In section 10 of *De Immortalitate animae (On the Immortality of the Soul)*, Augustine tries to prove that God is inseparably present in the soul. On this subject, see Cary (2000), Ch. 8.

⁵⁰ *De mor. ecc.*, 20.

⁵¹ Cary (2000), pp. 112-113.

immaterial contact with Him, and in being inwardly illuminated and occupied by His truth and holiness.⁵²

Hence, the goal of the journey is not a return to the Fatherland, but a real “contact” with the eternal Truth, which is God. On this basis, one might legitimately say that the Augustinian inner world has no gateway that may directly introduce the soul to a divine life. In this particular sense, the inner world of each soul is like a cloister, a private space illuminated by the light of the eternal Truth.⁵³ This is where one attempts to contemplate God and the ideas located in His mind.⁵⁴

For this reason, Philip Cary suggests that Augustine’s search for Truth cannot be accomplished by a single inward movement: Since soul has no divine character, the realization of its true nature by an inward turn does not lead one to God. The contemplation of God necessitates a subsequent upward movement,⁵⁵ since He is to be looked for both *in* and *above* the soul.⁵⁶ What is important from our standpoint is that this complex movement does not lead to the supersession of the private inner space and to the complete incorporation of the individual soul to a higher principle. For Philip Cary, the radical difference between Plotinus and Augustine appears here: Since the Augustinian inward turn does not lead the soul to the recognition that it is a part of a whole, it gains a relatively “private” character.

⁵² *De mor. ecc.*, 11.18

⁵³ In *Tr. in Joann. ev.* 23.10, Augustine says: “Descend into yourself; go to your secret place, your mind.” Meagher (1998), p. 29.

⁵⁴ Note that soul’s vision of God is doomed to stay imperfect, in the sense that it cannot see God as He is, but -as the famous Pauline formula suggests- “through a glass in a dark manner.” See *Conf.* 10. 5 (7). *Tr. in Joann. ev.*, 18.9-10 says: “Return to your heart. See there what perhaps you may perceive of God, since there is the image of God. Within the inner human being dwells Christ, therein you have been made anew after the image of God. In his own image, recognize its author” Meagher (1998), p. 40 (my emphasis).

⁵⁵ Cary (2000), p. 39.

⁵⁶ Note that these spatial references “in” and “above” should be used figuratively, as Augustine argues in *Conf.* 7.10(16).

We think that this notion of “privacy” may be useful for understanding the distance between Augustine and his Platonist forefathers. However, we should be careful about the modern, “subjectivist” implications of the term. The use of the word “privacy” may cause us to think that Augustine’s inward turn is a purely *reflexive* process throughout which the primary goal of the self is to get into contact with itself. As a consequence, we may be inclined to see this process as a movement of “radical reflexivity,” where what is important is the “intimacy of self-presence.”⁵⁷

Emmanuel Housset harshly criticizes this inclination and condemns it as a “*somnambulisme de commentaire*.”⁵⁸ There is no doubt that the idea of inward turn is central for the Augustinian religious and ethical experience. However, Housset thinks, the ultimate goal of this inward turn is not self-reflection and self-knowledge, but a radical movement of transcendence, an act of opening oneself to God. This movement does not belong to an “I,” an “ego” that has already reached an ontological and psychological integrity and that aims to reach the knowledge of God through self-reflexivity. Through inward turn, one aspires to be transformed by the eternal light of Truth and to become a “person.”⁵⁹ Hence the main element of this turn is not

⁵⁷ These two terms are borrowed from the following passage of Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*: “[the language of inwardness] represents a radically new doctrine of moral resources, one where the route to the higher passes within. In this doctrine, radical reflexivity takes on a new status, because it is the ‘space’ in which we come to encounter God, in which we effect the turning from lower to higher. In Augustine’s doctrine, the intimacy of self-presence is, as it were, hallowed, with immensely far-reaching consequences for the whole of Western culture.” See Taylor (1992), pp. 139-140.

⁵⁸ Housset (2008), p. 31. Note that one of Housset’s main targets here is Charles Taylor.

⁵⁹ Here we follow Housset’s argument and the particular signification of the term “person” which Housset attributes to Augustine. According to Housset, Augustine is the inventor of the notion of “person” (and not that of “ego” or “subject”), since he is the first thinker to use the term for attributing unity to an act of speech. “Person,” in this sense, does not gain a juridical and ethical signification as it will later do with Locke and, following him, Kant. It appears as an element of the theological debates concerning the nature of the Trinity, and its primary role is to answer the question “Who is speaking?” As such, it refers to a “singularity which is not accidental and which introduces a distinction and not a separation” (Housset 2008, p. 42, my translation). As Housset suggests, this sense of the term does not relate it to a process of

introspection but a radical movement of “transcending,” as the principle “transcend yourself” from *De Vera Religione* reveals.⁶⁰ For this reason, the relation of the soul with God can by no means be described as that of a full-fledged “subject” with his/her “object.” Through inward turn, the self opens itself to that which is “other” and tries to transcend itself in order to listen to Truth.

At this point, one should carefully distinguish between the implications of the Augustinian “transcend yourself” and those of the Plotinian return to the Fatherland. This act of transcendence is not a process of divinization through which a person merges with an *impersonal* divine principle and becomes one with it. Through the Augustinian inward turn, one tries to “become a person” by listening and responding to the absolutely divine “person,” which is God.⁶¹ Even if this process leads the soul to a radical transformation, it does not remove its particularity.⁶² On the very contrary, it is what constitutes the particular “person” by giving it a voice and by holding it intact. While the Plotinian inward turn leads to the temporary nullification of the individual soul, its Augustinian version engenders the opposite outcome: It institutes the particularity and the “privacy” of the person.

self-reflexivity that is implied by the later terms “ego” and “subject.” See Housset (2008), Ch. 1, especially pp. 32-35 and 41-44. For a broader account of the history of the notion of “person,” see Housset (2007), especially the first two chapters on Augustine.

⁶⁰ *De Vera Religione*, XXIX, 72: “Do not go abroad. Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth. If you find that you are by nature mutable, transcend yourself. But remember in doing so that you must also transcend yourself even as a reasoning soul.” Goulven Madec describes the situation as follows: “The Augustinian interiority may therefore be seen as a movement of transcendence. [...] One has to be detached from the exterior world and turn to himself, not in order to stay there, but in order to go beyond himself and towards God. Interiority is conversion [...]” See Madec (1994), p. 156 (my translation). On the same point, see also Housset (2008), p. 36.

⁶¹ Housset (2008), p. 51: “In effect, in the absence of a divine part that belongs to the soul, the absolute being should himself be a person, i.e. a liberty and a goodness, in such a way that man, on the basis of his call, may himself become a person.” (my translation)

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 57.

Therefore, if the term “private” is to be used in the context of the Augustinian inward turn, its content should be clarified in the following way: The Augustinian turn is “private” in the sense that it does not lead to the incorporation of the soul to a higher principle, but to the very constitution of a human “person.” To repeat, “privacy” is not used here to qualify an act of self-reflexivity that takes place within an independent “I” searching for God. This “private” inward turn is inseparable from an act of turning towards God and meeting His divine light.

Given this account of the Augustinian inward turn, one may underline the aspects of Augustine’s ethical project that represent a rupture from its predecessors. In the passage that we have quoted above, Pierre Hadot suggests that in various forms of the ancient practice of care for the self, one undergoes a “movement of interiorization” and, through an accompanying movement, one “encounters another kind of exteriorization.” This seems to be true for Augustine’s case, if we accept that the eternal light of the Truth that one encounters in his/her innermost depth is a transcendent being and, as such, constitutes a form of “exteriority.” However, the goal of Augustine’s inward turn is radically different from -to repeat Hadot’s words- “[being] aware of oneself as a part of nature, and a portion of universal reason” as in the case of Stoics or neo-Platonists. For Augustine, we are not parts of the universal reason but the distinct products of God’s benevolent creation. Accordingly, the inward turn is marked by an element of “privacy,” in the sense that it aims at a radical transformation through which we try to reach a new integrity, a new “personal” existence. From such a perspective, what is new in the

Augustinian ethical/religious experience is its “personal” character, if we use the term “person” in its Augustinian, theological/anthropological sense.⁶³

In the following section, we will concentrate on the conception of sin that such a “personal” ethical enterprise brings in.

Against Objectivity: The Will and its Choices

We have already explained above how the solution to the problem of evil forced Augustine to distance himself from Plotinus’ theory of matter and human soul. To this end, Augustine had to propose a new notion of evil based on the idea of *aversio Dei*, according to which human soul, by its own incentive, turns away from its ontological source and falls into nothingness.

The dialogue entitled *De libero arbitrio (On Free Choice of the Will)* is where Augustine elucidated the reasons behind this act of turning away and the particular human psychology that makes it possible. The work belongs to the early stage of Augustine’s career, the period usually referred to as “the Cassisiacum period.” Until then, the thinker had converted to Christianity and, under the guidance of his Platonist masters, he had begun to work arduously in order to provide an unshakeable philosophical basis for his new religion. *De libero arbitrio* may be considered as the key text of the period, since it is the most elaborate formulation of the Augustinian alternative to Manicheans’ heretic views on the existence of evil. The dialogue shows in an extremely clear fashion how the solution to the problem of evil leads Augustine to

⁶³ See note 59 above.

give the already existing notion of *voluntas* a new theoretical content and a new strategic role.

The opening line of the text puts forward Augustine's enterprise in a plain form. Evodius, Augustine's interlocutor, asks: "Please tell me: isn't God the cause of evil?" At the outset, Augustine makes it clear that he should definitely find a well-grounded negative answer to the question: God cannot be the cause of evil, for He is the one who rightly punishes the evils being done. As to the evils that human beings suffer, those are not to be considered as evil once we look at them from the perspective of God. They are instead the righteous punishments that God gives for evils that are done. This idea, inspired by Stoicism, prepares the ground for the use of *voluntas* as a central term in explaining the source of evil. By canceling out the distinction between evils that we do and evils that we suffer, and by reducing the latter ones to the punishments of the former, Augustine takes a first step in explaining the existence of evil with reference to human beings' own initiatives. From now on, his main problem is to understand the reason why human beings perpetrate evil, and whether God plays a role in this.

In the following pages of the dialogue, various suggestions concerning the reason why an act is considered to be evil are discarded. The satisfactory criterion comes about in 1.4.9-10: What makes an act evil is its being accomplished through *libido*, i.e. inordinate desire. Augustine's subsequent account of how *libido* becomes dominant is based on the Platonic idea that reason [*ratio*] should be superior to other, inferior faculties. Hence, evil-doing is the outcome of an internal disorder, whereby the lower element dominates over the superior ones. Accordingly, the problem is to find how the

lower elements become dominant. It is at this point that Augustine introduces the idea of *voluntas* as the key element of his solution to the problem of evil:

The conclusions that we have reached thus far indicate that a mind that is in control, one that possesses virtue, cannot be made a slave to inordinate desire by anything equal or superior to it, because such a thing would be just, or by anything inferior to it, because such a thing would be too weak. Just one possibility remains: *only its own will and free choice* [propria voluntas et liberum arbitrium] *can make the mind a companion of cupidity.*⁶⁴

This means that only human beings (and their *voluntas*) can be held responsible for their internal disorder that leads them to evil-doing. From this point onward, the notion of will and the idea that it gives human beings the ability to make free choices will pervade the rest of the text, as well as the philosophical enterprise that Augustine undertakes in the dialogue. However, one should note that although Augustine's way of using *voluntas* has revolutionary consequences, which will be explained later, he never presents a systematic treatment of the nature and functioning of this power.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, we think that his writings give us sufficient clue for grasping the novelty of his conception of *voluntas* and the ethical universe that it leads to. In the following pages, we will point out this novelty by showing how Augustine changed the terms of the ethical investigation and thereby made a serious contribution to the history of ethical problematizations of error. We will show how Augustine, throughout his new conception of *voluntas*, fought against the Manichean version of objectivity of human error.

⁶⁴ *De lib. arb.* 1.11. (my emphasis)

⁶⁵ Djuth (1999), p. 881. Kahn shares the same idea and argues that such a systematic treatment will not be possible before the idea of *voluntas* is integrated into the Aristotelian theory of human action by Aquinas. See Kahn (1988), p. 238.

Augustine and the Tradition

Neither the notion of *voluntas*, nor the idea that human beings can make choices belongs to Augustine. Since Cicero, *voluntas* has been standard Latin translation of the Greek term *boulêsis* -a term extensively used in Greek philosophy since Plato and Aristotle.⁶⁶ The idea that the ethical assessment of human acts necessitates that those are done out of choice was not less present, at least since Aristotle's theory of choice in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The novelty that Augustine brought was the way he combined these two ideas in a new theological and anthropological context.

Plato and Aristotle

Since *boulêsis* is the Greek origin of the Latin *voluntas*, a closer glance at this concept may help us to comprehend the novelty of the Augustinian theory of will and free choice. Plato and Aristotle constitute our preliminary points of focus, since their theories of moral psychology offer us the basic aspects of the notion of *boulêsis*. The fact that Plato does not use the term *boulêsis* itself in his theory does not reduce the relevance of his ideas for two reasons: First, it may be safely argued that his theory of tripartite soul in the *Republic* introduces the basic aspects of the Aristotelian term *boulêsis*, even if there is not any direct reference to the term.⁶⁷ Second, the verb *boulesthai* (i.e. "to wish" or "to want"), from which *boulêsis* is derived, is used in Plato's dialogues, and its use is more or less in harmony with the spirit of the Aristotelian *boulêsis*.⁶⁸ Therefore, it seems

⁶⁶ Kahn (1988), p. 241.

⁶⁷ Cooper (1999), pp. 240-241

⁶⁸ As Charles Kahn suggests, the verb is used in *Gorgias* 468e5 and *Symposium* 200b-e. See Kahn (1987), p. 91 and p. 93. Kahn also argues that the Aristotelian distinction between *boulêsis* and *epithumia* is "inherited from the *Gorgias*, probably by way of semi-technical usage in the Academy." See Kahn (1987), p. 91.

legitimate to discard some of the significant differences between Plato's and Aristotle's respective theories of action and to focus on the continuity between their ways of theorizing the human sources of motivation. As we will show in the following paragraphs, what is common in Plato and Aristotle's moral psychology is the way in which they attribute a motivational quality to reason. In a sense, both theories are in severe tension with the relatively modern inclination to distinguish between a fundamentally non-rational motivation or desire to act and the beliefs that contribute to the formation of an action.⁶⁹ Reason in Plato, and in some particular sense in Aristotle, is not only a faculty that is responsible for the reflexive and calculative procedures that prepare an act. It is also a motivational source that pushes the agent towards a definite object of desire. In this sense, reason has a desiderative quality.

The theory of tripartite soul that Plato presents in *Republic* IV and IX is based on this kind of a desiderative conception of reason. As *Republic* IX. 580d suggests, "there are three pleasures corresponding to the three parts of the soul, one peculiar to each part, and similarly with desires and kinds of rule." The *logistikon*, which is the rational part that ideally rules over the two other parts, has its own desire that orients it towards a definite object. It is not only the part that calculates and thinks, but also the part that is qualified as *philomathes* and *philosophon*, i.e. the lover of learning and wisdom (IX.581b). Hence in *logistikon*, the capacity to learn and the desire to learn are intertwined and connected under a single principle.⁷⁰ In the same way as the *thymoeides*

⁶⁹ As Kahn remarks, a typical version of this distinction is found in Hume, who thinks that a belief is not sufficient to motivate the agent to act, and that passions are the veritable sources of our actions. A more recent version of such a distinction is found in Donald Davidson's desire-belief theory. See Kahn (1987), pp. 77-78.

⁷⁰ Kahn (1987), p. 82.

(spirited part) desires honor and the *epithumia* (appetitive part) desires pleasure, the *logistikon* desires wisdom and it is by nature oriented towards the good. As the famous theory of justice in the soul in the *Republic* suggests, the basic goal of our ethical endeavor is to make these different parts act in harmony, i.e. under the rule of the highest among them, which is *logistikon*. Consequently, the reason why a human being commits evil acts is that the activity of his *logistikon* is overshadowed by lower sorts of desires, especially those grouped under the name of *epithumiai* (appetites).

Two decisive characteristics of this theory are worth emphasizing, since they have serious consequences for a comparison of Augustine's theory of motivation with that of Plato:

First, all three motivational sources -or desiderative parts- that we listed above have naturally-given objects: good for the *logistikon*, honor for the *thymoeides* and money or profit for *epithumia*. For Plato, such a clear-cut distinction imposes itself once we consider those cases in which we are simultaneously motivated to act in two separate ways: We may want to drink because we are thirsty, but we keep away ourselves from doing it. In such a case, what happens is a clash between two different motivational sources, i.e. the appetitive part that pushes us towards the act of drinking and the rational part that prevents this act on rational grounds.

A significant result of such a clear-cut distinction is the following: While explaining the formation of human acts, Plato does not introduce any faculty that has a capacity to make "free choices" in the sense of being able to decide for its own proper object. Obviously, this should not mean that Plato's ethics excludes the possibility for human beings to make choices and to commit evil acts for which they will be held

responsible. Although he does not present a systematic theory of choice and responsibility (as Aristotle will later do), these basic notions are somehow presupposed or implied by his theory.⁷¹ What is important here is that the mechanisms underlying choices, as well as the evildoings resulting from them, are not explained with reference to a unified source of action that has the capacity to choose freely. For Plato, our choices do not result from a central faculty of choice, but from the combination of different, hierarchically ordered desires. What makes an action good depends on the harmony between these different desires of the soul, a harmony to be guaranteed by the rule of *logistikon* over the other two parts. What matters, therefore, is to reach an order in which our rational wishes (that Aristotle will later name as *boulêsis*) can rule over the others, and thereby lead us towards the good.

Second, in Plato's theory of action, the intellectual and volitional elements are not separated as it will later be the case for Descartes, to take the most typical example. As the notion of "rational wish" (which is one of the translations for the Aristotelian *boulêsis*) will later show, the Platonic rational part is not a merely cognitive instance, whose main function is to inform an allegedly "pure" faculty of wanting such as the Cartesian will. The *logistikon* is not only that part of the soul through which we reach the knowledge of the good, but it is also the part that *pushes us* towards that kind of knowledge. Hence, its intellectual and volitional functions are closely interrelated, and this is the reason why its role in good acting is not complementary but essential. For this reason, Plato's famous "intellectualism" that finds its most articulate formulation in the early dialogues (especially in the famous motto "wrongdoing is due to ignorance" of

⁷¹ The myth of Er (*Republic*, Book X) that we presented in Chapter II of the present thesis is one of the clearest formulations of human responsibility in Plato.

Protagoras) may be said to persist in the more mature and complicated theory of the *Republic*. Insofar as we have a rational wish, a *boulêsis* that pushes us towards the good, the knowledge of the good has not only cognitive, but also motivational content.⁷²

Aristotle followed the spirit of his master's theory of motivation and improved it in some considerable respects. For one thing, he grouped the three desiderative sources of action under the generic name *orexis* (usually translated as "desire"), and treated them as the three elements of the desiderative part [*orektikon*] of the soul.⁷³ He thought that *boulêsis* is the desire that pushes the soul towards good action. On the other hand, even if in the *De Anima* he rejected the Platonic theory of tripartite soul, it is safe to think that his ethics is still under the influence of such a Platonic partitioning:⁷⁴ The theory in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is based on the distinction between rational and non-rational parts of the soul, and the Aristotelian ethical enterprise is dominated by the effort to make the rational part rule over its irrational counterpart. In this context, *boulêsis* (like *thumos* and *epithumia*) plays the role that Plato tacitly attributed to it in the *Republic*: it is the rational wish that is naturally oriented towards the good and that ideally rules over the other, non-rational desires. Once again, human acts are conceived as the results of the

⁷² Wetzel (1992), p. 3; Kahn (1987), pp. 101-102

⁷³ *De Anima*, II, 3 (414b). It is necessary to point at one significant difference between Plato's and Aristotle's taxonomies, even if it does not have significant implications for our account of *boulêsis*. Aristotle introduces a distinction -absent in Plato- between the rational and desiderative parts of the soul, and categorizes *boulêsis* under the desiderative part. Properly speaking, therefore, it is not reason itself which has a desiderative nature, but *boulêsis* that belongs to the *orektikon*. In this sense, Aristotle's theory seems to assume -at least to a certain extent- the modern distinction between desires and beliefs. On these points see Kahn (1987) p. 78.

⁷⁴ Irwin (1980), p. 143.

combination of different desires to act, and the main problem of ethics concerns the acquisition of the habit of acting on the basis of *boulêsis*.⁷⁵

Hence, insofar as he has no recourse to any distinct faculty of free choice, but only to different desires in conflict with each other, Aristotle stays within the Platonic paradigm. Nevertheless, it is impossible to overlook the fact that he deviates considerably from his master's path when he presents a systematic theory of choice, deliberation and responsibility. When, in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he tries to establish a firm distinction between acts that are ethically relevant and those that are not, Aristotle makes important contributions to the prehistory of *voluntas*.

First, on the basis of the already-existing legal terminology of the Athenian law, he makes an elaborate distinction between “voluntary” [*hekousia*] and “involuntary” [*akousia*] acts,⁷⁶ and presents the first full-fledged theory of responsibility of Western philosophy. He suggests that only acts belonging to the former category are open to ethical appraisal, since those are the ones that are done without external compulsion and with full knowledge of the particular circumstances.⁷⁷

Second, Aristotle introduces the notion of choice [*prohairesis*] and distinguishes it from the notion of *hekon*. For him, the category of *hekon* is wider than that of choice, since it includes acts that are done “on the spur of the moment,” i.e. without being

⁷⁵ Aristotle's famous theory of *akrasia* is where we see the most articulate formulation of this conception of action. The acratist man is the one who is unable to make his rational wishes rule over the other, non-rational desires. See Cooper (1999), p. 247.

⁷⁶ Note that the translation of these two terms as “voluntary” and “involuntary” poses serious problems, since these translations seem to relate these categories to the faculty of *voluntas* that, as we have already said, is unknown to Aristotle. The French translations proposed by Gauthier and Jolif as “à son gré” and “malgré soi” are more suitable. See their translation and commentary of *Nicomachean Ethics (Éthique à Nicomaque*, Louvain-Paris, 1959). On this point, see Jean-Pierre Vernant's article entitled “Ébauches de la volonté dans la tragédie grecque” in Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), p. 49.

⁷⁷ NE 1109b-1110a

chosen. For this reason, *hekon* may be used to qualify children's and animals' ways of acting.⁷⁸ The category of choice, on the other hand, relates exclusively to those acts preceded by rational deliberation [*bouleusis*].⁷⁹

However -and this is a critical point for our research- neither the pair of *akon-hekon*, nor the idea of choice are considered by Aristotle in relation to a unified source of action such as *voluntas*. It is true that the Aristotelian theory of action contains the key elements of later theories of *voluntas*; but Aristotle's aim is not to establish systematic links between those elements and to build a distinct, unifying concept.⁸⁰ On one side, there is the notion of choice and the *akon-hekon* pair that have relatively narrow ethical relevance -since they do not relate to the ultimate *end* of an action but rather the *means* to this given end. On the other side there is *boulêsis*, i.e. the rational wish that is *naturally* oriented towards the good (or the apparent good) and imposes on us the ultimate end of our acts.⁸¹ The choice, by itself, does not give the motivation to reach the ultimate end, it only prescribes the right path to follow in order to reach the pre-given object. The object and the motivation to reach it come from *boulêsis*, which is naturally inclined towards good.

Since the idea of choice concerns only the means to reach a given end, the idea of responsibility that flows from it has a limited ethical significance. Over them rules the idea of *boulêsis* with its naturally given object, and its link with the idea of ethical

⁷⁸ NE 111b5

⁷⁹ NE1112a

⁸⁰ Kahn (1988), p. 240.

⁸¹ Note that what is pre-given is not the end of a particular sort of action, but the ultimate end, which is *eudaimonia*. In this sense, a human being is able to choose those ends that are at the same time the means to reach the ultimate end. But the highest good, which is *eudaimonia*, is not chosen, since it is necessarily given by *boulêsis*. See Cooper (1986), pp. 11-24.

responsibility is not clearly formulated. For this reason, Aristotle's theory does not permit us to establish a solid theoretical link between the idea of ethical responsibility (and choice) and the desiderative sources of our acts.⁸² Aristotle does not formulate his conception of ethical responsibility with reference to a separate faculty of acting endowed with the capacity to make free choices, i.e. to orient itself towards good or bad ends. A bad action comes about as the consequence of the agent's disability to see correctly where his *boulêsis* orients him, or to see which means will guide him towards the end given by *boulêsis*. For Aristotle, this disability does not relate to *boulêsis* itself, but it is the consequence of the interference of non-rational desires in the process of choice. The wrongdoing, therefore, is not the outcome of a spontaneous act of "wanting" or "wishing" (since wish [*boulêsis*] is always the wish for the good or the apparent good), but of a disability to let the *boulêsis* reach its natural end. Hence, the reason why one fails to do good acts is that his non-rational desires obstruct the path of *boulêsis*, which is already oriented towards the good.

Stoics

When we come to the Stoics, we see that *boulêsis* no longer plays the central role that it once occupied in Plato and Aristotle. The Stoic view of human being is not based on a distinction between different parts of the soul and different kinds of desire that correspond to them. Even the idea of a general tension, central to both Plato and Aristotle, between rational and irrational motives for acting is unfamiliar for Stoics. For

⁸² Kahn's remarks on this point are highly illuminating. After saying that Cicero translated the Greek term *hekousion* as *voluntarium*, he continues: "The mere translation of Greek terminology into Latin serves to link the voluntary in an essential way to *voluntas*, whereas nothing in Greek connects *hekousion* with *boulêsis*." See Kahn (1988), p. 241.

them, human being, in his/her mature age, has no irrational impulse. The source of wrongdoing is explained without reference to something external to the rational element in the soul: Wrongdoing is the outcome of a wrong judgment based on a wrong conception of nature.

However, this does not mean that Stoic philosophy lacks a theory of human motivation. Indeed, Stoic ethics is based on the existence of a basic impulse called *hormê*. But unlike *boulêsis* and other types of *orexis* that are central to Plato's and Aristotle's theories, the Stoics' "impulse" is always a response to the impressions [*phantasiai*] that one has. For this reason, although it is sometimes translated into Latin as *voluntas*, the Stoic *hormê* is far from being a self-sufficient source of motivation.⁸³ In this sense, its role in the moral theory of Stoics is not comparable to that occupied by *boulêsis* in Aristotle or Plato. Although it is the force behind an action, it is not, properly speaking, its source. The true source is always an impression.

The contribution of the Stoics to the prehistory of *voluntas* and free choice appears somewhere else, in the notion of assent [*sunkatathesis*], which is introduced as a central ethical term. While in animals and children an impression automatically conditions an impulse, mature human beings, armed with the faculty of reason, have the ability to accept or reject a given impression and thereby impede the realization of an impulse. Through the mechanism of assent, the Stoic agent filters the impressions and chooses the appropriate ones, i.e. the ones that are to be accepted as the accurate representations of the existing state of affairs. The result is what may be called a rational impulse, an impulse that will lead to an action which is in harmony with nature.

⁸³ Sorabji (2000), p. 329.

This is where human responsibility enters into the scene according to the Stoics: Assent is a free faculty that makes human beings responsible for the impressions that they accept. In this sense, compared to Aristotle or Plato, the Stoics are more inclined to suppose the existence of an independent faculty that grounds human responsibility. However, we think that Richard Sorabji is right when he underlines the reason why the notion of assent is fundamentally different from *voluntas*: Although it is a mediatory intellectual faculty that makes actions possible, it is not the source of actions.⁸⁴ The motivational source of actions -i.e. impulse- is considered in isolation from the intellectual operations surrounding the process of acting.

When Augustine undertook the solution of the problem of evil in *De libero arbitrio*, the conceptual tools that he found ready at hand were those offered by the tradition mainly built around the theories of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. As we hope to have shown, these theories contain important elements which would later become parts of different theories of *voluntas* and free choice. However, two of their central characteristics make it impossible for us to discern in them a formulation of an independent faculty of “wanting,” namely *voluntas*.

1. Neither in Plato and Aristotle, nor in the Stoics do we find a moral psychology where the ethical motivation underlying acts is treated in isolation from the intellectual operations inherent to them. In Plato and Aristotle, the assumption of a rational desire towards the good made such a distinction impossible. The Stoics, on the other hand, made a distinction between motivations and intellectual operations, but they refrained

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 329-330.

from attributing any ethical role to the former. Hence, only the latter (i.e. the mechanism of assent) was relevant to their ethical theory. *Voluntas*, however, usually relates two different ideas: on the one hand, the source of our actions, and on the other, the faculty that grounds ethical responsibility.

2. These different theories identify the human soul as a hierarchically stratified entity that lacks order when the highest part cannot rule over the rest. As we have shown, the Platonic tripartite soul and the Aristotelian distinction between three different sorts of desire put forward the idea of multiplicity of motivations and the ideal of unity that originates from it. The Stoics, on a different level, introduced such a hierarchy, by thinking that reason [*hegemonikon*] is not only a pure cognitive faculty but also an instance that would ideally rule over the entire soul. This point is important, since the assumption of different parts, faculties or degrees in human soul enabled them to explain the motivational sources of human action without referring to a unified faculty of wanting. For them, the goal of our ethical endeavor is not to improve the functioning of this unified faculty, but to form the soul in such a manner that the lower principles are ruled by the highest one.

We may also safely suggest that these two principles constitute the basic components of what is usually known as the ancient “intellectualism.” In some way or another, these theories presuppose that the knowledge of the good has a motivational content, with the outcome that the intellectual grasp of what is good is the essential component of a good, philosophical life. Accordingly, reaching this knowledge is much more than the outcome of a simple cognitive process and becomes a central part of ancient ethical projects. Despite serious differences among them, Plato, Aristotle and the

Stoics have this aspect in common, as well as the related idea that the life of contemplation is the best kind of life.

At this point, it is worth remembering that Plotinus, who constitutes the most discernible point of contact between Augustine and the ancient tradition, followed these principles and the intellectualist orientation that they implied. As we have already suggested, Plotinus' theory of soul is based on a distinction between the higher soul (or reason (*En. I. 1. 7*)), which has its source in the intelligible realm [*Nous*], and the lower soul immersed in material existence. His theory of evil-doing, as well as his conception of good life directly flows from this central stratification. And the idea that there is, in every individual soul, an element that persists to be in contact with the *Nous* makes Plotinus an intellectualist *par excellence*. Indeed, he explicitly suggests that the best kind of life is the life of contemplation, which is the life enabling the soul to carry on its upper movement towards its "Fatherland."

We hope that it is by now possible for the reader to have an outline of the ancient philosophical tradition that Augustine inherited. We will show later on how he transformed these elements, especially those he has found in Plotinus, so as to give *voluntas* a new psychological and ethical function. But before that, we should touch upon those general traits of the Christian religion that were to play significant roles in orienting Augustine to such a conceptual innovation.

Christianity

Albrecht Dihle, in his classical Sather Lectures on the history of the notion of will,⁸⁵ puts stress on the role of the Christian conception of God in the development of the idea of *voluntas*. He argued that in Greek tradition the ideal of good life has been grounded on an overlap between human reason and natural order, and the intellectual cognition of this order was the key element of any theory of ethical progress. However, according to the Judaic and Christian conceptions of God, the idea of divine imperative has a central place, and a perfect overlap between the believer's rational capabilities and God's decisions is unconceivable.⁸⁶ According to Dihle, the abyss between divine imperatives and the ability of human reason to conceive them necessitated the emergence of the idea of "willing." For the believer, obeying God was possible only by following his imperatives and doing as "He wishes." And since the comprehension of these wishes was beyond the capacities of human beings, the "will" to follow God's imperatives were central.⁸⁷

Although Dihle's account can be criticized for its oversimplifications, we think that his basic intuition is quite illuminating: It shows us the potential limits of an intellectualist moral psychology in building a consistent Christian ethics. Moreover, Dihle's goal is not limited to pointing at the basic differences between pagan and Christian conceptions and to explaining the historical development of the concept of will

⁸⁵ Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982

⁸⁶ A similar theme can be found in Bouton-Touboulic (2004), p. 300. She argues that in Augustine, the universal law -that may also be conceived as the product of a personal God's *voluntas*- constitutes a broader realm than the Stoic idea of natural order. This law may contain some human realities that are not to be considered as "natural."

⁸⁷ Dihle (1982), Ch. I, pp. 1-19.

on this basis. On the contrary, he meticulously shows that the presumption of the existence of a human faculty of wanting did not automatically arise when the Christian worldview met ancient philosophy. As he puts it, until fourth century, Christian thinkers continued to build their ethical theories around fundamental intellectualist principles. In their responses to Gnostics, the Christian Fathers Clement, Origen, Justin and Irenaeus did not try to build an alternative to their enemy's intellectualism and continued to treat the cognition of Truth as the primary ethical goal.⁸⁸ Dihle thinks that the intellectualist tendencies of these thinkers prevented them from building a philosophical anthropology that would enable them to cope with the "Biblical idea of man being exposed to inexplicable commands of God."⁸⁹ As we will try to show, such an anthropology is formulated by Augustine on the basis of a novel understanding of the notion of *voluntas*.

Voluntas as the New Foundation of Morality

In the preceding pages, we repeatedly suggested that the tradition inherited by Augustine was based on intellectualist principles. Now it is time for us to explain how, in what sense and to what extent Augustine diverged from this tradition.

If we want to be cautious about Augustine's role in the history of philosophy, the question "to what extent?" deserves some preliminary attention. Although Augustine's deviation from the tradition is observable in certain key aspects of his ethics, it would be false to describe his overall enterprise as a reaction to ancient philosophical tendencies. In fact, there are good reasons to emphasize the continuous link between ancient tradition and Augustine by seeing him as the most important figure of what is usually

⁸⁸ Dihle (1982), Ch. V, p. 112.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 113.

called the “Christian antiquity.” As expected, Augustine’s Platonism has, at least in its initial phases, strong intellectualist elements that will continue to shape the future career of the thinker. His earlier dialogues such as *De Ordine* (386), *De Beata Vita* (386), *De Immortalitate animae* (387) or *De libero arbitrio* (387-395) are all marked by the dominance of certain intellectualist aspects that Augustine inherited from the Platonist tradition. In *De Immortalitate*, to take the most striking example, Augustine is strictly faithful to the Plotinian spirit in his conception of soul: He agrees with his master that the human soul has a part that is divine and immortal, and that the aim is to activate this part. Although this kind of Platonist assumptions will be abandoned when they will contradict with Augustine’s understanding of the Holy Scriptures, they will continue to influence the general traits of his thought.

This continuity is best observed in Augustine’s “eudemonism.” The idea that the goal of ethics is to reach *beatitudo* (which is the Latin term for the Greek *eudaimonia*) dominates Augustine’s entire work, and especially his earlier texts. From this particular perspective, there would be no mistake in considering Augustine as an ancient thinker. However, due to the novelty of the way he describes this *beatitudo* and of the concepts that he introduces in describing the related ethical project, Augustine may be considered as the representative of a new era, one marked by various elements of the Christian religion.

We think that the Augustinian *voluntas* is such a new concept that is developed in a context largely permeated by the intellectualist vocabulary of ancient philosophy. In the following pages, we will propose to conceive it as a new seed implanted in the ancient soil of Greek and Roman eudemonism. And to understand the novelty of the

concept and the role that it fulfills in Augustine's ethical theory, we will take a look at the way it is exposed in *De libero arbitrio* and the kind of ethical project that it leads to.

The Eudemonism of *De libero arbitrio*

A general look at the *De libero arbitrio* is sufficient for realizing the predominance of Platonist intellectualism and eudemonism in the dialogue. The beginning part, where the reasons for human beings' sinful acts are investigated, exposes the connection between evil and human understanding in a highly Platonic fashion: We do not learn to do evil, since the one who really learns something understands it, and all understanding is good.⁹⁰ In a later passage, Augustine relates the idea of *beatitudo* to the Platonic ideal of order in the soul and explains his version of eudemonism on the basis of intellectualist principles:

Whatever this thing is in virtue of which human beings are superior to animals, whether we should call it 'mind' or 'spirit' or both (for both terms are used in Scripture), if it rules and controls the other things that constitute a human being, then that human being is perfectly ordered. [...] Therefore, when reason, mind or spirit controls the irrational impulses of the soul, a human being is ruled by the very thing that ought to rule according to the law that we have found to be eternal. (1.8.)

It is not difficult to discern here the echoes of the Platonic-Plotinian (as well as Aristotelian) eudemonism, which is based on the suggestion that human soul contains both rational and irrational sources of motivation and that the final good is reached by the domination of the former over the latter. For Augustine, *beatitudo* will be reached by following a basically Platonist agenda, i.e. by grasping the unchangeable principles and thereby enabling the rational element in the soul to rule over the irrational one.

⁹⁰ *De lib. arb.* 1.1

From this point onward, Augustine's preoccupation with the problem of theodicy leads him to ask the reason *why* the rational element fails to accomplish its goal. The answer should differ from Aristotle's account of *acrasia*, where the dominance of lower elements constitutes a key component of the explanation. For Augustine, the basic principles of the divine order exclude such a possibility, since they preclude the rule of lower elements over higher ones. Therefore, the only way for Augustine to explain such a disorder is to hold the mind [*mens*] itself responsible for it. This means that the mind should have a power through the use of which it may become "a companion of cupidity." This power is *voluntas*, which is the faculty through which the mind makes free choices.

Voluntas and its Movement

In order to understand Augustine's conception of morality in the *De libero arbitrio*, one has to compare the use of *voluntas* in this text with the Greek *boulêsis* that we have presented above. There is an obviously legitimate ground for making such a comparison: As we have already stated, the Latin term *voluntas* has been coined from the verb *volo* (to want) in order to translate the Greek term *boulêsis*.⁹¹ The first and relatively obvious difference between the two terms concerns their relation with the idea of ethical responsibility. While in the *De libero arbitrio*, Augustine sees *voluntas* as the only responsible for evil, neither Plato nor Aristotle attribute any such role to *boulêsis*: Evildoing is not the outcome of *boulêsis*, but of its being impeded in reaching its goal,

⁹¹ Terence Irwin clearly states that "Augustine's conception of will is derived from Aristotle's conception of *boulêsis*, taken over by the Stoics." Irwin (2007), p. 400.

which is the good. Insofar as it is necessarily oriented towards the good, *boulêsis* can only be the positive ground of ethics.

The second major difference between *voluntas* and *boulêsis* concerns their objects and the nature of their movement: While the movement of *boulêsis* is determined by its pre-given object, the same is not the case for *voluntas*.⁹² This point follows from Book III of *De libero arbitrio*, where Augustine makes a distinction between voluntary and natural movements. In the opening lines of this book, Evodius asks Augustine to explain the reason why the will turns from the unchangeable good towards its own, inferior good (3.1). In his answer, Augustine first suggests that the movement of the soul should be different from a natural movement, so that we can rightly blame those who sin (3.1). In order to show this difference, he uses the example of a falling stone:

This movement of the will is similar to the downward movement of a stone in that it belongs to the will just as that downward movement belongs to the stone. But the two movements are dissimilar in this respect: The stone has no power to check its downward movement, but the soul is not moved to abandon higher things and love inferior things unless it wills to do so. And so the movement of the stone is natural, but the movement of the soul is voluntary.

At first glance, this distinction between natural and voluntary movements may seem too simple and obvious to elucidate the novelty of Augustine's position. However, it shows us the extent to which Augustine has taken his distance from the Platonists. The passage shows that the principles grounding Augustine's classification of voluntary/involuntary differ from those grounding the Greek *akon-hekon* distinction. In Plotinus, to take the most striking example, a movement deserves to be called *hekousion* by the simple fact of its being done without any external compulsion. For instance, the movement of the

⁹² Note that we discuss here the Augustinian conception of *voluntas* as it is presented in the *De libero arbitrio*. As we will later suggest, some of Augustine's later remarks on *voluntas* in the *De civitate Dei* will be in conflict with this conception. On this point, see Chapter V.

falling soul is *hekousion*, in the sense that it is not caused by anything but itself.

However, this does not rule out the possibility that the object (in this case the individual soul) has an internal, natural tendency toward such a movement, and that its act does not flow from a choice. For Plotinus, when something is disposed to act in a given way its movement may very well be qualified as *hekousion*, even if it cannot choose to act in the opposite way. The couple of *akon-hekon*, as we have already mentioned above, is not based on the possibility of choice.⁹³

On the basis of the passage that we have quoted above, we can suggest that this is not the case with Augustine. The idea of voluntariness conflicts with that of pre-orientation, especially the one that belongs to the internal, natural make-up of the entity in question. The movement of the will, in this sense, is not to be conceived as a consequence of a natural predisposition to move that it has. Voluntariness and freedom of choice imply each other, in the sense that the possibility of free choice (and that of the moral appraisal of acts) depends on the possibility of *voluntas* to orient itself as it wants to, i.e. without being compelled by any pre-given object or tendency.

This is one of the reasons why Augustine's position in *De Libero*, despite its eudaemonist undertones, represents a rupture from its ancient predecessors. In the case of Plotinus, the central part of an ethical project is to become disposed in such a way that the best part in us succeeds to rule over the others, pursues its natural orientation and thereby maintains its contact with the Intellect. Augustine, in the *De libero*, follows Plotinus in setting as his goal the rule of the superior part over lower ones. However - and here he deviates from Plotinus' strategy- the rule of the superior part depends on the

⁹³ O'Brien (1977), p. 407. Note that this idea may be applied to Plato's and Aristotle's use of *hekousion*. See NE 1111b. On Plato's conception of *hekousion*, see Muller (1997), p. 94.

proper use of the power of *voluntas*, which *may* be oriented towards evil. Like its ancient predecessors, the Augustinian soul has to be endowed with certain good dispositions (i.e. virtues), thanks to which it can keep track of the good life. But the way these dispositions are gained depends on a power that has the capacity of choice.

However, putting emphasis on this difference should not lead us to identify the position of Augustine in *De libero arbitrio* as absolute voluntarism. When further in the same dialogue, Augustine states quite explicitly that human beings naturally will to be happy (1.14), the meaning of *voluntas* comes closer to that of the Greek *boulêsis*, i.e. a wish that has its own object.⁹⁴ This idea seems to be in conflict with the distinction that Augustine makes between natural and voluntary movements: If we all will to be happy (and we cannot “choose” not to will to be happy), how can we differentiate between the movement of *voluntas* and the natural movement of a stone? In what sense, then, *voluntas* can have a power to choose?

We do not think that this question has a consistent answer in Augustine. Although he makes a distinction between natural and voluntary movements, his conception of *voluntas* preserves a natural tendency, at least as far as happiness is concerned. However, we do not think that this situation leads to an inconsistency that ruins the foundations of Augustine’s ethics, since the tendency of *voluntas* towards happiness has little ethical implications. As we will try to show, the ethical role of *voluntas* does not come from its tendency towards happiness, but from the way it is *used* in order to reach that goal.

⁹⁴ Djuth (1999), p. 881

In order to clarify this point, we will start with a question that Augustine raises soon after he makes the suggestion that *voluntas* and its free choices constitute the only reason behind the existence of evil:

How can anyone suffer an unhappy life by the will, when absolutely no one wills to be unhappy? [...] How can we claim that it is by the will that human beings achieve a happy life, when so many are unhappy despite the fact that everyone wills to be happy? (1.14)

Here, Augustine points at a possible contradiction in his conception of *voluntas*. If there is unhappiness in the world, the main reason lies in our voluntary choices. But it is also clear that we all will to be happy, i.e. that *voluntas* makes us wish happiness. How can *voluntas*, necessarily oriented towards happiness, may also be the source of our unhappiness?⁹⁵ In order to solve this conflict, Augustine makes a distinction -unknown to the Greeks- between “willing” and “willing rightly”:

Those who are happy, who must also be good, are not happy simply because they will to be happy -even the wicked will that- but because *they will it in the right way*, whereas the wicked do not. (1.14)

In order for a human being to reach happiness, which is the final good towards which *voluntas* leads him/her, he/she should live rightly. We might think that this idea is in line with Plato’s and Aristotle’s accounts of *eudaimonia*, according to which the natural orientation of *boulêsis* towards the good does not guarantee a good and happy life. However, upon closer scrutiny, it is possible to realize that Augustine’s moral psychology -especially his use of *voluntas*- leads to a significant difference in his general conception of good and right action. In Aristotle’s and Plato’s cases, the reason why *boulêsis* cannot reach its pre-given goal is the interference of other, non-rational

⁹⁵ Note that such a contradiction would not arise in Plato or Aristotle, since, to repeat, the power that orients us towards good should not be at the same time held responsible for our evildoing.

kinds of desires external to it. For Augustine, however, the reason why the will is unable to reach what it wishes is not simply a lower sort of desire that obstructs its path but the will itself, or more exactly the disability of the will to use itself “rightly.” What Plato and Aristotle have conceived as the outcome of a clash between different kinds of desire, is for Augustine the result of a malfunction of one and the same motivational source, which is *voluntas*: We will to be happy, but we do not will it rightly. *Boulêsis* itself does not, by its own initiative, move away from its natural course towards *eudaimonia*. By contrast, *voluntas* has the possibility to diverge from its “normal” path and thereby miss the mark.

This is the reason why the tendency of *voluntas* towards happiness has no primary ethical relevance in *De libero arbitrio*. What counts primarily for Augustine’s ethics is not the natural object of *voluntas*, but rather the “rightness” of the act of willing. In other words, what is important is to aim at the proper sort of happiness in the proper way. Goodness, on the other hand, is not what *voluntas* conquers by following its “natural” movement, but rather what is reached by the *right use* of our will and of its capacity to make choices.

This is the reason why the natural tendency of *voluntas* towards happiness differs from the natural tendency of *boulêsis* towards the good: *Boulêsis* is not a tool that is subject to right use or wrong use but, to repeat, a desire that is naturally oriented towards what is inherently good for us. However, *voluntas* (with its ability to make good and bad choices) is an instrument to be used. In *De libero arbitrio*, Augustine compares *voluntas* to physical organs, which are good (because God created them for our use), but which can be used wrongly: The eyes are good insofar as “they were put into the place of

greatest dignity” to be used to provide security, while many people use them in the service of inordinate desires (2.18). Although *voluntas* is superior to bodily organs (for it belongs to soul), it is still an intermediate good [*medium bonum*]: Even though it is an instrument that is designed for good purposes, it can be used in the service of evil as well.⁹⁶

“Moral Space” and the New Conception of Morality in the *De libero arbitrio*

What is important from our standpoint is the kind of ethical project towards which this idea of “*voluntas* as an instrument” leads us. The idea of “willing rightly” is closely related with the notions of order [*ordino*] and justice [*justitia*], which appear as the constitutive elements of the Augustinian moral sphere.⁹⁷ Both terms are extensively used in some key passages of the *De libero arbitrio*, but their first detailed treatment takes place in the earlier dialogue entitled *De Ordine* (386). Here, Augustine tries to reconcile the perfection of God’s order with the existence of evil in the world and, to this end, he brings in the notion of justice: Since God is just and since justice cannot be imagined without any reference to a distinction [*distinctio*] between that which is preferable and that which is not, the good has to have an opposite. Evil, therefore, has a key role in the operation of divine justice: It is the fundamental element on the basis of which God makes distinctions that sustain his justice.⁹⁸ In other words, the divine order necessitates

⁹⁶ Virtues, on the other hand, are considered to be great goods, since they cannot be used wrongly (*De lib. arb.* 2. 19).

⁹⁷ For a lengthy and elaborate analysis of these two notions, see Bouton-Touboulic (2004).

⁹⁸ See *De Ordine*, 18 and 19. Bouton-Touboulic points at the incongruity of thinking that the existence of evil should precede the creation of the universe. This is not the case, since Augustine does not think that the existence of order depends on that of evil. He instead thinks that the temporal “use” of the order may necessitate the existence of evil. See Bouton-Touboulic (2004), p. 260.

the opening of a space between good and evil, a “moral space” in which God’s justice will operate.

The opening of this space is what gives the “instrument” called *voluntas* its moral function. As Augustine says, the reason why *voluntas* is a good thing is not that it is naturally oriented towards the good, but that it enables human beings *to act rightly* by choosing the good by their own power. We think that this idea of “acting rightly” represents another rupture that Augustine makes with his ancient predecessors: The idea of free choice, together with the notions of order and justice that ground it, leads to a further qualification that would be of little significance for Greek philosophers: A good action is *also* a right action. There is no doubt that Augustine follows Plato and Aristotle in conceiving goodness as the inherent quality of an action. However, he brings in a further category (“rightness”) which becomes operative in the divine moral space and which is strictly related to the possibility of choice. Accordingly, an action is good only insofar as it is right, that is, insofar as it is the outcome of the right use of *voluntas*, and thereby deserves a positive evaluation in the divine order.

Another key passage of the *De libero arbitrio* is worthy of detailed analysis, since it contributes to our comprehension of the novelty of the Augustinian moral space. Book I of the *De libero arbitrio* concludes with the firm conviction that free will, or more correctly the capacity of *voluntas* to make free choices, is the reason behind the existence of evil in the world. But a question that Evodius addresses to Augustine in the closing lines points at a new problem that will occupy them in a large part of Book II. Evodius says:

But I have a further question. Since, as we have found, free choice gives us the ability to sin, should it have been given to us by the one who created

us? It would seem that we would not have sinned if we had lacked free choice, so there is still the danger that God might turn out to be the cause of our evil deeds.

This question indicates the fact that attributing all evil-doing to free choices of *voluntas* would not be sufficient to spare God from His responsibility in the existence of evil. By endowing human beings with such a capacity of choice and thereby giving them the opportunity to commit evil acts, God is indirectly responsible for evil. For this reason, the second book opens with Evodius' following demand:

Now explain to me, if you can, why God gave human beings free choice of the will, since if we had not received it, we would not have been able to sin.⁹⁹

The strategy that Augustine follows in answering his interlocutor is worthy of detailed analysis, since it shows the way in which he puts forward what we would like to call a "juridical" conception of morality. During the first few paragraphs, Augustine orients his interlocutor to the solution of the problem. In 2.1, he gives the following account:

If all of this is true, the question you posed has clearly been answered. If human beings are good things, and they cannot do right unless they so will, then they ought to have a free will, without which they cannot do right. True, they can also use free will to sin, but we should not therefore believe that God gave them free will so that they would be able to sin. *The fact that human beings could not live rightly without it was sufficient reason for God to give it.* The very fact that anyone who uses free will to sin is divinely punished shows that free will was given to enable human beings to live rightly, for such a punishment would be unjust if free will had been given both for living rightly and for sinning. (2.1 - my emphasis)

Two ideas stated (or presumed) in this passage may be formulated as follows:

(1) The goodness of human beings differs from, say, that of animals, insofar as it is related with the idea of "acting rightly."¹⁰⁰ One may even say that the goodness proper

⁹⁹ *De lib. arb.* 2.1.1

¹⁰⁰ Evodius explicitly states this in the part preceding the lines that we quoted above: "Furthermore, I claimed, and you agreed, that everything good is from God. From this we can understand that human

for human beings is not based solely on their being endowed with reason, but also on their capability to make choices and to act rightly.¹⁰¹

(2) This capability, here and in other parts of the *De libero arbitrio*, is directly related to the divine regime of rewards and punishments, grounded and legitimized by the justice of God. Hence, a human being can be good by carrying out right actions, i.e. by being constantly evaluated in the moral space, by being subject to divine justice, hence by being a part of the regime of rewards and punishment.

We think that Augustine, in legitimizing the existence of free will in human beings, introduces a conception of moral space that is unknown to Greek eudemonism. Divine order (which contains evil as a constitutive principle), together with divine justice and the related regime of rewards and punishments, becomes the grounding element of this new moral space. Accordingly, the goodness of human beings is explained with recourse to the rightness of their voluntary actions, hence to the possibility that they will be rewarded by God's justice.

On this basis, we would like to argue that the most significant change that Augustine introduces to pagan eudemonism concerns the way in which *beatitudo* is reached. On the one hand, Augustine follows the traditional orientation of eudemonism since he takes *beatitudo* as the final good. On the other hand, while in Greek eudemonism, the attainment of happiness overlaps with the acquisition of necessary virtues, in Augustine's eudemonism, happiness is reached as the reward of doing the

beings too are from God. For human beings as such are good things, since they can live rightly if they so will."

¹⁰¹ A more explicit expression of this idea is found in Book III of the same dialogue: "[...] a creature that sins by free will is more excellent than one that does not sin only because it has no free will" (*De lib. arb.* 3.5.15).

right actions. In the passage where Augustine makes the distinction (that we have already mentioned) between “willing to be happy” and “willing it rightly,” this idea is explicitly stated:

[T]he eternal law [...] has established with unshakable firmness that the will is rewarded with happiness or punished with unhappiness depending on its merit. And so when we say that it is by the will that human beings are unhappy, we do not mean that they will to be unhappy, but that their will is in such a state that unhappiness must follow whether they will it or not.
(1.14)

In a way unknown to Greek eudaemonists, happiness is integrated into the regime of rewards and punishments. While in Greek ethics, *eudaimonia* overlaps with the acquisition of proper virtues, Augustine’s *beatitudo* is rather described as the derivative outcome of a virtuous life: it is the reward of right action. Although God’s justice (i.e. his righteous evaluation of right and wrong actions) guarantees the overlap between virtuous life and happy life, there is a conceptual differentiation between the two terms: the former does not imply the latter. In order that virtuous life leads to happiness, God’s mediation is required. The existence of such a conceptual wedge and God’s mediatory position permit us to safely conclude that *beatitudo*, compared to the idea of “acting rightly,” has a secondary, derivative position in Augustine’s *De libero arbitrio*.

Once we accept that a series of “juridical” elements are introduced throughout the *De libero arbitrio*, we may tend to think that Augustine puts forward a deontological conception of morality, where the ideas of obligation, autonomy and rule-following are central. The centrality of free choice and the tendency to conceive happiness as a part of the divine regime of rewards and punishments may partly legitimize such an approach. Moreover, such a qualification may appear all the more adequate when one considers

how the eudaemonist attitude of *De libero arbitrio* partly loses its dominance in the following phases of Augustine's career. Following F. Carney,¹⁰² we can argue that the influence of eudemonism, which is observable in Augustine's earlier dialogues such as *De Moribus*, *De Beata Vita* and *De libero arbitrio*, begins to fade in later texts such as *On Lying*, *Enchiridion* or *De civitate Dei*.

Yet, reading the theory in the *De libero arbitrio* as the foundation of a deontological morality would go against the spirit of the text as well as that of Augustine's overall theoretical enterprise. Despite the revolutionary steps that he takes in the dialogue, Augustine never becomes the advocate of a simplistic version of voluntarism, where the emphasis would be on the spontaneous choices that we make when confronted with fixed laws.¹⁰³ Augustine does not describe *voluntas* as a neutral, autonomous faculty of choice that uses its absolute freedom in every new situation. He rather sees it as a faculty to be developed in a proper way and to be equipped with proper dispositions. Although Augustine's strategy for grounding ethics introduces crucial juridical elements, his overall ethical enterprise is eudaemonist in its essential aspects.

While explaining the role of Christianity in the formation of modern "morality" (for which the notions of obligation and choice are dominant), Alasdair MacIntyre makes the following remark:

What Christianity requires is a conception not merely of defects of character, or vices, but of breaches of divine law, of sins. An individual's character may at any given time be a compound of virtues and vices, and

¹⁰² Carney (1991)

¹⁰³ In fact, such a conception should rather be related with the Pelagians' standpoint. See Melsin (1973, p. 141) who thinks that Pelagians defended a rather "juridical" conception of religion, based on a contract with God. See also TeSelle (1999), p. 612, where reference is made to *Ad Simpl.* 1.2.18

these dispositions will preempt the will to move in one direction or another. But *it is always open to the will to assent to or dissent* from these promptings. [...] Everything turns on the character of the interior act of will. Character, therefore, the arena of the virtues and vices, simply becomes one more circumstance, external to the will. *The true arena of morality is that of the will and of the will alone.*¹⁰⁴

For the reasons that we presented above, it would be too simplistic to apply the basic argument of this passage (i.e. that Christian morality revolves around the notion of *will* alone) to Augustine's philosophy, at least to his position in the *De libero arbitrio*.

Nevertheless, we think that MacIntyre's emphasis on the centrality of *will* in Christianity helps us to identify the historical role that Augustine played with his theory of *voluntas* in *De libero arbitrio*. We think that the idea of "acting rightly" and the related notion of free choice make Augustine a central figure in the development of a new attitude that will later be the source of modern morality, in which the ideas of rule-following and duty will be central.

Conclusion

We hope that it is by now clear how Augustine, in order to defeat Manicheans' arguments for the "objectivity" of evil, makes radical innovations that will change the way human action will be problematized in the following generations: Freedom of choice is introduced as the sole source of evil, and it grounds a new conception of morality in which God's order, justice and regime of rewards and punishments become constitutive elements. This new conception of morality is grounded by a new moral psychology in which *voluntas* (a unified source of action capable of free choice) gains a dominant position.

¹⁰⁴ MacIntyre (1997), p. 168 (my emphasis).

We hope that we have convinced the reader about the properness of the use of the adjective “subjective” to characterize the Augustinian conceptions of evil, sin and error, even though “subject” as a philosophical category may be inadequate to understand the Augustinian project as a whole. First of all, we think that the term can be used as a counterpart of “objective,” since one of Augustine’s main concerns in the *De libero arbitrio* is to explain evil in purely personal bases, without any reference to objective factors. We think that in coping with Manichean objectivity, Augustine went much further than Plato and Aristotle had gone while they were trying to cope with the objectivity of Greek tragic error: He did not only define human error and responsibility on an individual basis (as Plato and Aristotle did), but also presented a developed moral psychology that would give a new ethical significance to the idea of personal responsibility. Furthermore, he achieved this by introducing a series of key elements that would later be the determining aspects of the category of “subject” and various conceptions of morality that would flow from it.

There is, on the other hand, a further reason for legitimating the use of “subjective” in our context. As we have already suggested, the Augustinian experience of sin invites such a use, since the ontological basis of sin is *aversio Dei*, a return from God to oneself. In this sense, Augustine’s philosophy seems to envisage the possibility for human person to have an allegedly *independent* existence, in which one loses contact with his/her ontological source. In this radically negative sense, the Augustinian human being can have a “subjective” experience. We hope that this negative sense will be clearer in our next chapter.

However, it would be erroneous to see Augustine exclusively as the proponent of a “subjective” notion of error and to explain his notion of human sin on this basis. Our account so far has been centered on the notions of *voluntas* and free choice, as they are presented in the *De libero arbitrio*, especially in Books I and II. However, it is a well-known fact that Augustine is not only the thinker of “freedom of choice,” but also that of the fallen condition of humanity and the necessity of grace for being saved. Beginning with *Contra Fortunatum* and the third book of *De libero arbitrio*, Augustine reflected on these themes, and his philosophy has from then on been considerably shaped by the problematics related to them. In the following chapter, we will present these new themes and show how Augustine, this time in his debate with the Pelagians, developed a new notion of objectivity that would be central for a new conception of human condition.

CHAPTER V

AUGUSTINE AGAINST PELAGIUS: THE CHALLENGE OF “SUBJECTIVE ERROR” AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF “OBJECTIVE” ELEMENTS

In his article that constitutes the basis of our distinction between “objective” and “subjective” notions of error, Kierkegaard makes an interesting remark that directly relates to our presentation of Augustine. In a passage where he contrasts the aesthetic error of ancient Greek tragedy with the ethical error of the moderns, he makes the following observation:

[The] more the subjectivity becomes reflected, or the more one sees the individual, *in the Pelagian manner*, left to himself, the more the guilt becomes ethical.¹

From our standpoint, what is interesting here is Kierkegaard’s unanticipated reference to Pelagianism, in a moment when he begins to explore the characteristics of moderns’ ethical error. Pelagius, who became the major opponent of Augustine after 411 A.C., seems to represent for Kierkegaard the typical thinker who treats human error on “subjective” grounds, thereby giving it an undisputedly “ethical” significance. Since our distinction between “objective” and “subjective” notions of error owes much to Kierkegaard’s article, we think that this reference to the Pelagian conception of action may contribute to the development of our research. Hence, it may make sense to investigate some aspects of the debate between Pelagius and Augustine so as to reach a proper account of Augustine’s role in the formation of a “subject-centered outlook,” and especially in the formation of a “subjective” notion of human error.

¹ Kierkegaard (1987), p. 143 (my emphasis)

Throughout the present chapter, therefore, we will take Pelagius as the defender of a “subjective,” individualistic conception of error, and show how Augustine, in his efforts to defeat his opponent’s arguments, introduced a new notion of objectivity into his ethics and moral psychology. This new notion of objectivity is at times in tension with the “subjective” elements that we have found in *De libero arbitrio*; and a considerable part of Augustine’s later efforts will be spent to eliminate this tension. Our goal will not be to reach an ultimate judgment as to whether Augustine succeeds in his efforts or not, but rather to underline some aspects of his anti-Pelagian strategy. We hope that, through our presentation, we will be able to point at some of the critical contributions of Augustine to the development of the new tragic vision that will prevail after the Renaissance.

Augustine and the Pelagians

Founded by Pelagius and represented by figures like Caelestius and Julian of Eclanum, Pelagianism has been an important movement of Augustine’s time, especially due to its active role in some of the central theological debates of the period.² Pelagius held the view that perfection was not only possible but also necessary for human beings, since God was asking a total, unconditional obedience from His followers.³ This assumption, accompanied by the belief in the importance of human being’s free choices for salvation, grounded what may be called a “juridical conception of morality.” Since this position was seemingly in line with most of Augustine’s views in the *De libero arbitrio*, both

² Gerald Bonner indicates that, unlike the Donatists, the Pelagians never became the representatives of a mass movement. In this sense, their influence was on the intellectual arena, rather than on a broader social scene. See Bonner (1992), pp. 36-37.

³ Brown (2001), p. 450

Pelagius and his follower Caelestius referred to various parts of this work in order to support their arguments.⁴ In fact, it would not be surprising to observe a partial overlap between Augustine's position in *De libero arbitrio* and that of the Pelagians, since their initial aim converged to some extent: They were both trying to support the institutionalization process of Christian orthodoxy by defeating the arguments of the Manichean heresy. For this reason, the Pelagians would argue that Augustine, in his later works, abandoned his position in the *De libero arbitrio* and fell prey to the main principles of Manichaeism.⁵

What pushed Pelagius and his followers to blame Augustine (for abandoning his earlier position and for embracing the Manichean worldview) was his contribution to the theological debates on the original sin and the divine grace. Around the year 400, the significance of infant baptism and the related issue of the impact of Adam's sin on his descendants had become a topic of lively debate in Rome. The North African tradition that Augustine would follow held that newborn infants were baptized because of Adam's sin, since the eating of the forbidden fruit did not only lead to mortality, but also to the development of a predisposition to sin in Adam's descendants.⁶ Although this view was not an established orthodoxy in that period, Augustine was convinced that it was based on the traditional, correct interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, and he did not

⁴ One clear example is Pelagius' treatise entitled *De Natura*, where the writer gave reference to *De libero arbitrio* 3.18.50 and argued that Augustine's later position was in contradiction with this text. See Bonner (1996), p. 34. In *Retractationes*, written towards the end of his career, Augustine himself gave a complete list of the *De libero* passages that the Pelagians could use in order to back up their arguments. See *Retr.* 1. 9. 3-6.

⁵ Pelagius's follower Eclanum, in his *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum* (5.28; 5.40; 5.43; 5.47-48; 5.61) blamed Augustine for adopting a Manichean position. See Djuth (1999), p. 883 and Bonner (1996), p. 40.

⁶ TeSelle (1999), p. 634

hesitate to follow it.⁷ Augustine's first text in which he openly defended and elaborated on the basic principles of this tradition has been *Ad Simplicianum* (dated 396), where he argued that human fragility (that is, human being's inclination to do evil in spite of his or her willingness to be good) comes from Adam's "original sin."⁸ According to Augustine, this fundamental event persists to have its negative influence on humanity and man's salvation is practically impossible without God's grace.

Ad Simplicianum is a representative work insofar as it contains Augustine's central arguments, which continually infuriated his Pelagian opponents. Pelagius and his disciples were entirely against the view that Adam's sin had a direct influence on the natural abilities of his descendants, and they argued that his negative role should be limited to that of constituting a bad example for humanity. Consequently, they also denied the necessity of divine grace in order to be saved, and they preferred to put emphasis on the voluntary efforts of each individual.

There is no doubt that the Pelagian controversy pushed Augustine to clarify and refine his position on the subject, and thereby made a direct contribution to the institutionalization and the development of Christian theology. What is interesting from our standpoint is the series of innovations that Augustine had to make in order to ameliorate his position, which was seemingly haunted by deep ambiguities: On the one hand, he was sure of the heretic nature of Pelagians' views, and believed that he had the Holy Scriptures to back up his position. On the other hand, he had to avoid any contact with the Manichean worldview, in which the role of the free choice of the will is

⁷ On this basis, André Sage argues that in these circumstances, the innovative position was not that of Augustine, but that of the Pelagians. See Sage (1993), p. 168.

⁸ See especially *Ad Simpl.* 10 and 11. This is the first text where the notion of "*peccatum originale*," probably coined by Augustine himself, is used.

nullified. For this reason, one of Augustine's principal goals during his later years has been to reconcile his anti-Pelagian position with the views that he had put forward in the *De libero arbitrio*. The result has been a complex theory of human condition, grounded by a series of arguments concerning the original sin, the fallen condition of humanity and the necessity of divine grace for human salvation.

A pivotal element of this theory has been a distinction, non-existent in the *De libero arbitrio* I & II, between the different states of the *voluntas* before and after Adam's fall. Augustine later argued that his theory of free choice of the will, as presented in the *De libero arbitrio*, was valid exclusively for the case of Adam, whose will was not yet corrupted by the original sin.⁹ The divine grace (or more correctly a particular version of it) was strictly necessary for the salvation of Adam's descendents, whose perverted wills had lost the power to choose the good. This distinction introduced a temporal dimension to the Augustinian theory and, in a sense, historicized the nature of the will. For this reason, the following parts of the present chapter will be dedicated to the exploration of the main characteristics of Augustine's account of what we may call "the history of the will." Our primary goal, in this survey, will be to comprehend the "non-subjective" aspects that Augustine introduced in exploring the nature of human error and of the human condition.

⁹ Towards the end of his life, Augustine will openly suggest that the definition of *voluntas* presented in *De Duabus*, which follows and develops the theory in *De libero arbitrio*, was valid only for the sinners in the Heaven, namely Adam and Eve. See *Retr.* 1.15.3. See also *De natura et gratia* 67 & 81, and Bonner (1996), p. 35.

The History of *Voluntas* (I): Adam, Eve and the Original Sin

The temporal dimension becomes an essential part of Augustine's theory of *voluntas* and free choice before the Pelagian controversy begins. In fact, Augustine introduces this dimension while he builds his arguments against the Manicheans, more exactly against the Manichean preacher Fortunatus. The idea appears for the first time in *Contra Fortunatum*, a work that consists of the records of a debate between Augustine and his Manichean opponent. Interestingly enough, the reason why Augustine introduces this historical dimension (that will later gain an anti-Pelagian signification) is his desire to defeat the Manichean objectivity as it is defended by Fortunatus. The Manichean preacher, in order to object to Augustine's argument for the centrality of free choice of the will, gives reference to certain passages from the New Testament that seem to support the Manichean dualism.¹⁰ These passages, according to him, explicitly suggest that the source of evil-doing is not to be looked for in the capacity to make free choices, but rather in those parts of human beings that are not subjected to God's law.¹¹

It is at this point that Augustine refers to the radical difference between the state of the *voluntas* before and after the fall:

I say that there was free exercise of will in that man who was first formed. He was so made that absolutely nothing could resist his will, if he had willed to keep the precepts of God. But after he voluntarily sinned, we who have descended from his stock were plunged into necessity. [...] Today in our actions before we are implicated by any habit, we have free choice of doing anything or not doing it.¹²

Hence, Augustine thinks, far from supporting a Manichean dualism, the Biblical passages that Fortunatus cites concern the state of human beings after the fall. Adam's

¹⁰ Those passages are: Romans 8:7, Galatians 5:17 and Romans 7:23, 25

¹¹ *Con. Fort.* 21

¹² *ibid.* 22

sin resulted in the formation of a bad habit in his descendents, a habit that takes the form of a “carnal prudence [*prudencia carnalis*],” as Augustine will call later in the same paragraph. Hence, what pushes human beings to do evil is not the body itself (which is created by God), but this habit that develops in them and that becomes their second nature due to the perversion of the will. In other words, it is what arises as an outcome of Adam’s first, purely voluntary sin.

Adam and Eve before the Sin

A crucial topic in Augustine’s later writings is the state in which Adam and Eve found themselves in Paradise and the factors that led them to their sin. Two of Augustine’s later texts, namely Book XIV of the *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*) and the *De Genesi Ad Literam* give similar accounts of Adam and Eve’s conditions in Eden, with slight differences of detail. The account in the *De civitate Dei* begins with the conviction that the feelings of fear and grief are not essential to man’s nature and that they appeared after the fall. Accordingly, Adam and Eve were living in a state of complete happiness in “that never-to-be-forgotten place of happiness called paradise.”¹³ There was no reason for them to fall prey to such feelings, since Paradise was where “everything was so abundant and so good, where neither death nor bodily illness was feared, where there was neither anything lacking that a good will might want to attain nor anything present to do hurt to the flesh or mind.”¹⁴

However, since Adam and Eve were created out of nothing, the perfection of their initial condition was far from being absolute. Their body, to begin with, was natural

¹³ *De civ.* 14, 10

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 14. 10

and corporeal, and for this reason corruptible. Hence, their immortality was not the result of an essential incorruptibility as in the case of angels, but rather from God's grace that actively prevented death. As Augustine makes it clear in the *Enchiridion*, theirs was an immortality of an inferior kind, consisting of being "capable of not dying."¹⁵ If they could keep on living without committing any sin, they would never die. As a result, their corporeal body would be transformed into a spiritual, angelic body.¹⁶

A similar lack of perfection was valid for their condition of happiness: Their initial state of happiness, pretty much like that of immortality, was subject to change. It was indeed true that in Paradise there was a "peaceful avoidance of sin" so that "no evil assailed them from without."¹⁷ But this only meant that there was no factor that would *necessarily* push Adam and Eve to sin, in the sense that it was *possible* for them not to sin [*posse non peccare*]. This means that Adam and Eve had no *predisposition* to transgress the divine command. Theirs was a peaceful existence never to be disturbed by an inordinate desire [*libido*], which could agitate their minds and lead them into a dangerous state of passivity. Sexual intercourse, to take the most extreme case, was done without the interference of uncontrollable desires, and procreation was possible without having any experience of cupidity.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Ench.* 28 (105)

¹⁶ In *De civ.* 14.15, Augustine says: "man [...] would have been spiritual even in flesh if he had observed the order."

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 14. 10

¹⁸ *De civ.* 14.21, 23, 24 and 26. Augustine makes a similar remark when he interprets the Biblical passage according to which Adam and Eve, before their sins, "were naked, and not embarrassed." He says: "The reason for this is not that they were unaware of their nakedness, but that their nakedness was not yet base because lust [*libido*] did not yet arouse those members apart from their will, and the flesh did not yet bear witness, so to speak, through its own disobedience against the disobedience of man." *De civ.* 14.17.

This is the sense in which the execution of sinful acts was not preceded by any existent negative quality and that it depended exclusively on the free choices of the *voluntas*. This, however, does not mean that Adam and Eve had a neutral faculty of choice that put them in equal distance from obedience and disobedience to God. On the contrary, there was a positive inclination in them, since, first and foremost, God had endowed Adam with a good and rightful [*recta*] will. In this sense, the possibility to avoid sin was not simply a theoretical possibility attributed to a purely indeterminate will. Adam was *positively pushed* towards the good, since his will had a power to exclude sin.¹⁹ Moreover, Adam's right will had the opportunity to operate under the guidance of the divine grace, which helped it to reach the goal that it had set to itself. The abyss between Adam's willing [*velle*] and his ability to reach his goal [*posse*] was bridged by God's constant support.²⁰

It should nevertheless be reminded that God's grace was not simply an additional support to help Adam in his free orientation towards the good. It was rather the necessary, *sine qua non* element that Adam needed in order to reach his positive goal. Augustine explicitly states that "it was not in man's power to live a good life without God's help even in paradise, although it was in his power to live an evil life."²¹ Created out of nothing, Adam needed God's help both for being immortal and for avoiding sin.²² Augustine's account of the initial nature of man was thus marked by the ideas of inferiority and human being's essential dependence on God. In this sense, even the

¹⁹ Solignac (1993), p. 102: "The power not to sin is not a mere possibility based on the indeterminacy of willing; it is, on the contrary, a moral dynamism, a power which is effective and actual, and which tends to positively exclude sin" (my translation).

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 106

²¹ *De civ.* 14. 27.

²² *De civ.* 14. 11 and 13. See also Rist (1993), p. 194.

“golden age” of humanity, experienced by Adam and Eve, was marked by some sort of fragility, similar to the one that would haunt Adam’s descendants. The original sin, accordingly, marked the passage from one sort of fragility to another, the latter being an incomparably more serious kind.

This is the reason why there arose the necessity to distinguish between the divine grace that human beings needed in their original state and the one that would be necessary to remedy the condition subsequent to the fall. In Adam’s case, man needed God’s grace *adjutorium sine qua non* (sufficient grace), which was a supportive grace that would enable man to reach the good that he chooses through his *liberum arbitrium*. The grace following the fall, as we will later show, is qualified as the grace *adjutorium quo* (efficient grace), since its primary function will be to recover the human *voluntas* by giving it the uprightness that it has lost with the fall.

On the basis of this account, Adam and Eve can be seen as the only human beings who lived in the regime of rewards and punishments, which, in our view, occupied a central position in the *De libero arbitrio*. It seems that they had the chance to choose the good through their wills and thereby to merit the divine rewards, or to choose evil and to be punished. But once we consider the necessity of the grace *adjutorium sine qua non* in Paradise, we realize that even in Adam and Eve’s case the persistence in good necessitated a divine support. Hence, one might say, as far as goodness is concerned, there is no free choice and merit in the real sense of these terms: Even in Adam’s case, merit presupposes the existence of the divine grace and an original dependence on God.

This, however, does not mean that Augustine's standpoint in the *De libero arbitrio* is made obsolete by the above-presented account of original sin. Although goodness requires divine support in the case of Adam, the same is obviously not valid for evil, which is described as an essential retreatment from God. Hence, *De libero*'s effort to account for sin on purely "subjective" grounds does not contradict the later theory of original sin. This point enables us to see one of the reasons why the term "subjective" should be used with great care in understanding Augustine's thought. In the Augustinian anthropology, the term "subjective" should always refer to the problematic -if not totally negative- aspects of human experience. While it would be meaningful and helping to understand Adam's sinful choice on exclusively "subjective" grounds, the same is not the case for the choice of the good. For Augustine, the experience of the good may in no way be conceived on exclusively "subjective" grounds. This is because such an experience, by its nature, implies an opening towards God and a movement of distancing from the "subjective" aspects of human experience.

On this basis, we think that it is safe to see Adam and Eve's sin as a purely "subjective" experience, on the condition that the term is used in a negative sense. We think that this negative use of the term "subjective" will gain further support when we explore the essential characteristics of Adam and Eve's first sin and the reasons that pushed them towards it.

Causes of the Original Sin

Despite their initial advantages and God's continuous support, Adam and Eve sinned. As the above-presented account suggests, Augustine refuses to explain this key

phenomenon with reference to the presence of some sort of an essential disposition to sin in Adam. This is the reason why he insistently suggests that *cupiditas* could not exist before the fall.²³ The account in the *De civitate Dei* 13.13 shows how *cupiditas*, as well as the related “carnal rebellion” arises immediately *after* the act of transgression. Once the divine grace leaves Adam and Eve as a result of their act of transgression, they become “ashamed of the nakedness of their bodies.” As the punishment of their sinful act, they begin to experience an “unprecedented movement of their disobedient flesh.” Their soul, once the peaceful master of the flesh, loses its control over its servant and begins to delight “in its own freedom to do wickedness.”

Since Adam has no inner disposition that pushes him towards sin, giving an intelligible account for the initial act of transgression becomes an extremely complex task. On the one hand, it is no longer possible to present a causal explanation of the event by relating it to the inner mechanisms of the agent, since this would lead one to presuppose the existence of some sort of a disposition to sin. On the other hand, it would not be proper to neglect any causal chain between the inner mechanisms of the agent and the act, since this would lead one to consider the act as a contingent fact, a mere chance event.²⁴ This means that one cannot take any step forward without considering the agent and the objective qualities of his act *together*. In other words, one cannot understand Adam without considering his sin. Conversely, if Adam’s *descendants* were at focus, moral psychology would arm us with a bunch of principles on the basis of which a general, abstract category of “moral agent” would be imagined and considered in

²³ *De civ.* 14.10. For this reason, it would be misleading to explain the initial transgression of God’s command on the basis of Adam’s disability to resist the temptation of the forbidden fruit. See Solignac (1993), p. 103.

²⁴ For a clear formulation of this dilemma, see Babcock (1988), p. 45.

isolation from any particular act of sin. But Adam belongs to a world in which we cannot make any judgment on “human being as sinner” without considering the sin that he or she commits. For this reason, Augustine’s focus should go back and forth between the doer of the deed and the deed of the doer.

A glance at the notion of *superbia* is enough to reveal this complexity. *Superbia* (usually translated as “pride”) is arguably the most complex term that appears in Augustine’s account of the original sin.²⁵ Since it usually refers to the archetypal form of sin, it is unquestionably one of the essential elements of Augustinian vocabulary. It owes this archetypal quality primarily to its historical position affirmed by *Ecclesiasticus* 10:15,²⁶ which depicts it as the “beginning of sin.” Adam’s *superbia* is “original” in the sense that it constitutes the “origin” of the sins following the fall, since those are *at the same time* punishments for the first sin.²⁷ But besides this historical precedence, *superbia* has a formal superiority over other sins, since it also gives them their paradigmatic form. In a sense, all sins may be defined on the basis of the essential element of *superbia* inherent in them. A clear example of this can be found in a passage of *De Trinitate* where Augustine considers avarice, which is conceived in 1 Timothy 6:10 as the root of all evils. Augustine argues that it is possible (and indeed central) to

²⁵ Note that in *Enchiridion* 45, Augustine mentions *superbia* as one of the numerous elements that constitute the original sin: “Still, even in that one sin -which ‘entered into the world by one man and so spread to all men,’ and on account of which infants are baptized- one can recognize a plurality of sins, if that single sin is divided, so to say, into its separate elements. For there is pride in it, since man preferred to be under his own rule rather than the rule of God; and sacrilege too, for man did not acknowledge God; and murder, since he cast himself down to death; and spiritual fornication, for the integrity of the human mind was corrupted by the seduction of the serpent; and theft, since the forbidden fruit was snatched; and avarice, since he hungered for more than should have sufficed for him -and whatever other sins that could be discovered in the diligent analysis of that one sin.”

²⁶ Augustine gives direct reference to this passage in *De Trin.* 12.14, *De Civ.* 12.6 and 14.13.

²⁷ *Sermon* 198.33, in Cavadini (1999), p. 680.

define avarice with reference to the paradigm set by *superbia*, which is situated in a more elementary level.²⁸

The reason why *superbia* constitutes a model for all sins is that it reflects, in its clearest form, the fundamental negative movement of the soul, which is *aversio Dei*. It is the “perverse elevation to forsake the ground in which the mind ought to be rooted, and to become and be, in a sense, grounded in oneself.”²⁹ It is a turn towards the self, not with the purpose of initiating the inner movement towards unchangeable things, but rather for the sake of mere pleasure. It is “falling away from the works of God to the will’s own works.”³⁰ In this sense, *superbia* is a fundamental element of Augustine’s Platonic conception of God and soul, since it refers to an essential rupture between the soul and its ontological ground. As expected, Augustine resorts to the imagery of light in order to clarify his point:

The initial wrong therefore was that whereby, when man is pleased with himself, *as if he were in himself a light*, he is diverted from that light through which, if he would but choose it, he himself also becomes a light.³¹

However, *superbia* is not defined exclusively with reference to the movement of *aversio Dei*. It is not only a turn from God and eternal things, but also an act *against* God and His decree. It is first of all an act of “transgression of a divine command.”³² When Augustine explains the difference between the original sin and the sins that succeed it, the idea of disobedience occupies a key position. Adam and Eve should avoid the eating

²⁸ *De trin.* 12.14

²⁹ *De civ.* 14.13

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.11

³¹ *ibid.*, 14.13 (my emphasis)

³² *ibid.*, 14.14. On this point, see Huftier (1964), p. 49.

of the fruit, not because it was bad or harmful, but only because it was forbidden. On this basis, obedience [*oboedientia*] is defined by Augustine as “the mother and guardian of all virtues in a rational creature.”³³ There is, in this sense, a parallelism between *superbia* as the archetypal form of sin and *oboedientia* as the “mother” of all virtues, since the *superbia* that led Adam to eat the fruit was, before all else, the negligence of *oboedientia*. And compared to the sins that followed, it deserved a more serious punishment, since this negligence happened before the soul is entrapped by carnal desires.

When it is used for defining the original sin, *superbia* gains a complex, if not paradoxical, signification. It tells us that the original sin is the outcome of a movement of turning away from God, and that this movement occurs in a context where nothing precedes and prepares it. The movement itself should primarily be understood as an objective event, as something that happens to an agent. It is, on the other hand, a “subjective” movement in that it is basically a movement of turning towards oneself, towards one’s “subjective” ground. It is a movement of “subjectification” that occurs at a moment when there is no proper “subject” through the analysis of which we can account for the movement.

Far from illuminating the phenomenon of original sin, the notion of *superbia* hints at the possible complexities inherent in it. In order to expose and reflect on these complexities, we will try to answer the most challenging question that Augustine’s theory of original sin brings about: Why did Adam and Eve, at a specific moment of their existence in Paradise, make this movement of “subjectification” and give birth to

³³ *ibid.*, 14.12

the resulting act of transgression? We think that this question is of prime importance in understanding the nature of human sin and its probable “tragic” significations. In the following pages, we will concentrate on this issue.

As expected, Augustine’s account in the *De civitate Dei* follows the general orientation of the theory of human choice and responsibility presented in the *De libero arbitrio*: *Voluntas* should be the ultimate cause of the act of transgression. When, in Book III of the *De libero arbitrio*, Evodius asked why there are those who sin and those who do not, Augustine refused to look for any ultimate cause beyond human will, on the ground that such a research would lead him to infinite regress: The cause of the will cannot be anything but the will itself (*De Libero*, 3.17). For him, the only theoretical step that one may take is to consider the *quality* of the will, i.e. to see whether it is a right [*recta*] or a perverted [*perversa*] will. However, this sort of investigation would not illuminate Adam’s case, since the perverted will -which Augustine also calls *cupiditas* (*De Libero* 3.17)- is the product of the first sin. For this reason, Augustine’s account of free choice in the *De libero arbitrio* is silent about the ultimate inner motives that oriented Adam’s *recta voluntas* towards transgression. The only remark comes in 3.19, when Augustine argues that the original sin was committed through the free choice of the will.

In *De civitate Dei* 14.13, we come across a detailed treatment of the motives that pushed Adam to commit the original sin. Here, Augustine openly suggests that Adam’s evil act should be preceded by an evil *voluntas*:³⁴

³⁴ As Babcock says, earlier texts such as *De Duabus* and *Ad Fortunatum* that treat this subject do not make such a claim. See Babcock (1988)

When the first human beings began to be evil, they did so in secret, and this enabled them to fall into open disobedience. For the evil act could not have been arrived at *if an evil will had not gone before*. [my emphasis]

This claim seems to need further explanation, since the account preceding it informed us of the fact that Adam had no liability to do evil; and that, on the contrary, he was positively directed towards the good. Since Adam is given a right will by God, and since perversion (or the resulting *cupiditas*) will not happen until the fall, how is it that Adam has an evil will? Why would Adam's still uncorrupted good nature give birth to an evil *voluntas*? Why would Adam's right *voluntas* be corrupted and deviate from its path before he sinned?

At this point, it would be rewarding to take a glance at *De moribus ecclesiae* 22 and *Enchiridion* 1.1.4, where Augustine reflects on issues that may illuminate this problem. In both passages, Augustine's primary goal is to argue that even though every created thing is good (as in the case of Adam), evil can exist. In the *Enchiridion*, he first suggests that good and evil can coexist in the same thing and that evil must have its source in the good (in the sense that it cannot have its own substantial existence). But in order to maintain this position, Augustine has to show that it is not in conflict with the spirit of the passage in the New Testament that says "A good tree cannot bear evil fruit" (Matthew 7.18). Augustine follows this Biblical metaphor and establishes a parallelism between the tree and the will: "Just as a bad tree does not grow good fruit, so also an evil will does not produce good deeds." If we read the above-cited *De civitate* passage with this metaphor in mind, we understand better why Augustine needs to suggest that an evil act should be preceded by an evil will: There must be a continuity between the quality of the act and the *voluntas* that gives birth to it, in order that our acts have any moral

significance. This, however, does not explain how evil acts can be the products of a good nature. For this reason, Augustine's next step is to make an addendum to the Biblical metaphor and to fit it into his initial idea, which implies that the evil should somehow have its source in the good. To this end, he establishes a further parallelism between the soil that bears the tree and the human nature: The soil, which is good insofar as it is created, can give birth to both good and bad trees. In the same way, "from a human nature, which is good in itself, there can spring forth either good or an evil will."³⁵ Although the metaphor and its Augustinian interpretation seem to be in harmony with the passage extracted from *De civitate Dei*, it is not clear how they can shed light on it. It shows that having a good nature does not guarantee having a good *voluntas*, but it does not explain why *voluntas* becomes evil. In the case of Adam, there is a supplementary difficulty: God has given Adam a right *voluntas*. With this argument, it becomes even more difficult to see why it has lost this original quality.

A possible strategy to deal with these difficulties would be to discuss the exact meaning of *voluntas* in this metaphor. Following J.-B. Faure, one might argue that in the *Enchiridion* passage, *voluntas* is not used as the soul's power to choose (as it was usually the case in the *De libero arbitrio*), but rather as the act of volition itself, which may also be qualified as a wish.³⁶ In such a case, the notion of *voluntas*, taken as the

³⁵ In *Con. Fort.* 22, Augustine uses the same Biblical metaphor to back up his conception of voluntariness: "Accordingly it is most truly said by the Lord of the two trees, the one good and the other evil, which you have called to mind, that they have their own fruits; that is, neither can the good tree yield evil fruit, nor the evil tree good fruit, but so long as it is evil. Let us take two men, a good and a bad. As long as he is good he cannot yield evil fruit; as long as he is bad he cannot yield good fruit. But that you may know that those two trees are so placed by the Lord, that free choice may be there signified, that these two trees are not natures but our wills, He Himself says in the gospel: 'Either make the tree good, or make the tree evil.' Who is it that can make nature? If therefore we are commanded to make a tree either good or evil, it is ours to choose what we will."

³⁶ J.-B. Faure's interpretation is presented in J. Rivière's explanatory note to the French translation of *Enchiridion* IV, 15. See *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin 9. Exposés généraux de la foi: De Fide et Symbolo* -

parallel of the tree, should have a different content than *voluntas* as a source of action: It should refer to a particular act of volition that arises from the good human nature, i.e. from the soil. By adapting this metaphor to the passage from *De civitate Dei*, we may assume that according to Augustine, the human nature (including its *voluntas* in the sense of power to choose) is initially good and it can nevertheless give birth to bad trees, i.e. evil *acts of volition*.

However, when we interpret *De civitate Dei* along the same lines, we realize that we only beg the question. If *voluntas* were nothing more than an act of volition, then Augustine's statement in the passage we cited would be redundant. In such a case, he would simply be saying that, before his act of transgression, Adam *wanted* to commit this act. However, Augustine seems to do more than simply suggesting that an evil act is preceded by an evil act of volition. He apparently defends a stronger position, according to which evil is the product of an evil will in the sense of a power intrinsic to Adam. In fact, in a later passage Augustine explicitly says that not only Adam's *voluntas* but also he himself is evil. In such a case, *voluntas* cannot simply refer to an act of volition, but rather to a power that determines Adam's quality as an acting agent:

Accordingly, the evil act, that is, the transgression that involved their eating of forbidden food, was committed only by those who were already evil. For only a bad tree could have produced that evil fruit.³⁷

This shows that there is no way for Augustine to escape from explaining the original sin on the basis of Adam's initial orientation towards sin. Hence, to capture the gist of Augustine's argument requires a proper understanding of this liability. One may suggest

Enchiridion, trans. J. Rivière, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1988, p. 335. For the use of *voluntas* as wish, see Djuth (1999), p. 881.

³⁷ *De civ.* 14.13. See also *De civ.* 14.11: "Thus the will itself, or man himself in so far as he was possessed of an evil will, was the evil tree, as it were, that bore the evil fruit that those works represented."

that the presumption of such an orientation preceding the first act of transgression may lead one to accept a version of Manichaeism and to suggest that Adam possesses a power that directs him towards evil. Here, what enables Augustine to escape such a risk is his emphasis on the Platonist undertones of his theory of *voluntas*: Since evil is nothingness, the turn towards it can only be the outcome of a defect. A clear exposition of this idea can be found in *De civitate Dei* 12.7, where Augustine tries to explain the reason why some of the angels have fallen:

No one then should look for an efficient cause of an evil will, for the cause is not one of efficiency but of deficiency even as the evil will itself is not an effect but a defect. For to defect from that which has supreme being to that which has less is to make a start in having an evil will.

Hence, what turns the will towards evil is not a substantial positive quality or a second nature that Adam has, but simply a lack of perfection: Although, as we already explained above, it was possible for Adam not to sin, he fell prey to his lack of perfection and sinned. In a sense, what possibly saves Augustine from being a Manicheist is not his voluntarism (as in the case of the Pelagians), but his Platonism: By relating Adam's evil will to a *deficient cause*, he spares God from any responsibility in human evil.³⁸ Evil, or the deficient cause that pushes (or rather "pulls") the soul towards evil has no positive ontological status and, therefore, cannot be God's product. To claim that Adam's nature is good insofar as it is created by God, and that the Creator gave him a right will does not contradict with Adam's having an evil will: Evil will is the product of a turn towards nothingness, a turn that has no efficient cause whatsoever.

³⁸ Babcock still thinks that this cannot save Augustine from being a Manicheist: "[...] despite his best efforts, [Augustine's] analysis swivels between a position that, in effect, reduces the first evil will to a random outcome, a chance association between agent and act, and a position that, in effect, makes the first evil will a function of God's withholding aid. [...] In this sense, at least, he did not succeed in casting off his Manichean past or in finding a strictly moral interpretation of angelic and human evil." See Babcock (1991), pp. 107-108.

For Augustine, it is possible to stop the enquiry once we come across this deficient cause. A glance at the *De libero arbitrio* 2.20 shows us that this idea is already presented there. When Augustine feels the obligation to clarify the ultimate source of the movement of turning away from God, he has recourse to this Platonic conception of evil:

For if that movement, that turning away from the Lord God, is undoubtedly sin, surely we cannot say that God is the cause of sin. So that movement is not from God. *But then where does it come from? If I told you that I don't know, you might be disappointed; but that would be the truth. For one cannot know that which is nothing.* [my emphasis]

This idea of deficient causality in the *De civitate Dei* goes hand in hand with a conception of *voluntas* that also has Platonic undertones. When compared to the one presented in the *De libero arbitrio*, this conception seems to be less open to a voluntaristic interpretation as the Pelagians would present. Here, Augustine suggests that the defect of *voluntas* “is contrary to nature,” with the implication that *voluntas* has in fact a natural orientation towards God, while the opposite movement is the outcome of its defect. In the *De libero arbitrio*, Augustine attentively distinguished voluntary movement from natural movement, whereas his account in the *De civitate Dei* seems to define the former on the basis of the latter: Insofar as it is oriented towards the good, a voluntary movement may be said to follow its natural orientation. In the opposite case, the movement is unnatural.³⁹

At this point, Augustine’s account of the fall can be summed up as follows:

³⁹ This implies that there is an inconsistency between the ways in which *De libero arbitrio* and *De civitate Dei* distinguish between the “natural” and the “voluntary.” One may think that this is a negligible difference, since Augustine’s primary goal in the *De libero* passage about the distinction between natural and voluntary movements is to emphasize the unnatural (and to that extent voluntary) quality of sin. In this particular context, there is no discrepancy between the *De libero arbitrio* and the *De civitate Dei*, since both are in agreement about the unnatural quality of sin. However, as we have already shown in Chapter III, Augustine says in the *De libero arbitrio* that human beings (and human *voluntas*) have a natural orientation towards happiness, and not towards the good. The good is reached through the right use of *voluntas*, which is no more than an instrument.

- (1) The act of transgression is preceded by an evil *voluntas*.
- (2) Adam's *voluntas* is evil because it deviated from its natural path.
- (3) This deviation, by definition, cannot have an efficient cause.

As this chain of arguments shows, despite all extra qualifications that Augustine introduces, there is no particular explanation about why Adam has an evil *voluntas*. In this sense, Augustine did not go further than he had already gone two decades before in the *De Libero arbitrio*: He still thinks that there is an almost logical impossibility in explaining the cause of Adam's having an evil *voluntas*, since it is a defective cause, equal to nothingness. All that Augustine can do is to point at a general, essential quality of Adam that makes him disposed to sin: He is created out of nothing.⁴⁰ To the above-presented account, therefore, the following clause should be added:

(4) The only explicable reason why Adam has an evil will is his having a defective nature.

On the basis of this idea of imperfection, it seems possible to reach the risky conclusion that Adam would "almost inevitably fall"⁴¹ and that the fall was "tragically necessary":⁴² If Adam is, by his nature, liable to fall, this may mean that he is not entirely blameworthy for falling, since his lack of perfection plays a central role in his sin. Obviously, this would be an utterly unacceptable conclusion for Augustine, because it would introduce an extenuating circumstance to Adam's guilt. John Rist attempts to show how the spirit of the Augustinian thought prevents such a tragic conclusion:

"Adam's fall may perhaps have been almost inevitable, but at each specific moment he

⁴⁰ *De civ.* 14.13.

⁴¹ Rist (1994), p. 106.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 107.

could have avoided it.”⁴³ As Rist’s use of the word “almost” suggests, there is no necessary logical link between Adam’s imperfection and his sin. Even if he was not perfect, he had the possibility to prevent sin.

What this means is that Augustine finds in Adam an essential liability to sin, but this liability has nothing to do with the first man’s moral psychology: Adam is not haunted by any kind of psychic or bodily force that pushes him towards sin. His liability to sin has only an ontological reason: Insofar as he is created out of nothing, Adam falls short of perfection. This ontological inferiority surely explains Adam’s initial condition, but the exact reasons leading to the particular act of transgression are still left in the dark. In a sense, Adam’s is the only sin that cannot be understood with reference to moral psychology or the notion of “moral agent” that such a psychology would suggest. To use Rist’s terms, we cannot find any reason underlying the act of transgression other than “Adam’s *inexplicable* submission to pride.”⁴⁴ This inexplicability, as we will later argue, is one of the crucial aspects of Augustine’s philosophy that gives rise to a reflection on the “tragic” condition of humanity.

The History of *Voluntas* (II): Human Condition After the Fall

As we already said in the first pages of this chapter, the most critical point of disagreement between Augustine and the Pelagians concerned their views on the influence of the original sin on Adam’s descendants. An enquiry into the different aspects and consequences of this disagreement shows us that what is at stake is much more than a simple theological dispute. This problem, as well as the different strategies

⁴³ *ibid.* p. 107.

⁴⁴ Rist (1994), p. 190 (my emphasis)

to deal with it, was central for the Christian conception of what might be called “the human condition.” As we already said in the introductory part of the present chapter, Augustine’s later years were marked by an effort to defend and develop the position of the African Church against the “heretic” views of the Pelagians. This task was of primary importance for Augustine, since he had to demarcate his position from that of his enemies, who claimed to base their views on certain passages of the *De libero arbitrio*. In the following pages, we will focus on the complex strategy that Augustine developed in order to defeat his enemies without entering into apparent conflict with his earlier theory of free choice. We think -and we hope to illustrate- that this complex strategy led Augustine to introduce a new notion of “objectivity of error” which, as we will suggest in the third part, lies at the basis of a new tragic vision which will shape the post-Renaissance tragedy.

The Problem of Transmission: Traducianism and Creationism

Augustine’s theory of the fallen condition of humanity was based on the assumption that Adam’s descendents, in some way or another, were the direct inheritors of the original sin and its negative consequences. After Adam, human beings did not only become mortal, but also sinful at birth. Consequently, baptism has been the only way to be cleansed from the stain of this original sinfulness. This explains why, in Augustine’s time, the debates on the original sin were strictly interconnected with those concerning the infant baptism. Augustine (as a member of the African Church) was first and foremost the defender of the indispensability of baptism for salvation. It is no coincidence that his first anti-Pelagian text *De Peccatorum meritis et remissione* (*On the*

Merits and Forgiveness of Sin), dated 412, revolves around the question of infant baptism and comports the subtitle *De baptismo parvulorum (On infant Baptism)*. This book is mainly a defense of the necessity of infant baptism against the views of the Pelagian Caelestus, for whom the goal of infant baptism was to make children the inheritors of the kingdom of heaven.⁴⁵

Even though Augustine's anti-Pelagian reaction has been stimulated by the discussions on infant baptism, there is no doubt that his views concerning the impact of Adam's sin on his descendents constituted the essential point of divergence between him and his adversaries. The Pelagians, as we have already stated, defended the existence of a somewhat indirect relation between Adam and the rest of humanity: They thought that the only negative influence of Adam's sin has been the fact that it constituted a bad example that later generations would voluntarily imitate. For Augustine, such an idea was no less than blasphemous, since it contradicted with certain key passages of the Pauline corpus.⁴⁶ He thought that a correct reading of Paul was convincing enough for maintaining that Adam's sin had a direct negative effect on humanity and that no salvation could be imagined without God's grace.

One of Augustine's favorite reference points concerning this issue is a well-known Biblical passage, or rather a notorious Latin mistranslation of it.⁴⁷ The English (Authorized King James Version) translation of Paul's Letter to the Romans 5:12 goes as follows: "Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and

⁴⁵ *De Peccatum Meritis et Remissione*, 1.18.23

⁴⁶ Romans 7 & 9, together with I Corinthians 15 are accepted as the main Biblical sources of inspiration for Augustine (Rigby (1999), p. 607). Romans 5:12 (that we will discuss below) is also of key importance.

⁴⁷ For this argument, see Quinn (1999), esp. pp. 233-237. Quinn's main reference is Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988).

so death passed upon all men; for that all have sinned.” The critical part of the sentence, for Augustine’s theory, was the clause “for that all have sinned.” This simply means that death passed from generation to generation because all human beings following Adam have sinned. In the Latin translation available to Augustine,⁴⁸ however, this last clause was rendered as “*in quo omnes peccaverunt*,” i.e. as “*in whom* all sinned.” In other words, through the “*in quo*” phrase, the Latin translation, as well as its Augustinian interpretation, suggested that all sinned *in* him. This interpretation thereby maintained a direct connection between Adam and his descendents. A famous passage of *Enchiridion* shows this interpretation clearly:

Because of this sin, [Adam’s children and Eve] were drawn through a variety of aberrations and sufferings to that final unending punishment together with the rebel angels, their corrupters and masters and companions. Thus, *by one man sin entered the world, and by sin death; and so death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned.*⁴⁹

It would be incongruent to explain the formation of this path-breaking doctrine simply with reference to a suspicious Latin translation of a Biblical passage.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, this passage illustrates in great clarity how a crucial component of Augustine’s view has been backed up by a mistaken Latin translation of the Bible. The passage has been of great use for Augustine, since it offered a legitimate ground for suggesting that, in some way or another, all humanity sinned *in* Adam.

⁴⁸ Note that Augustine did not use the Latin vulgate translated by Jerome, who was his contemporary.

⁴⁹ *Ench.* 26 (my emphasis)

⁵⁰ John Rist, to take one significant example, is highly skeptical in tracing back Augustine’s doctrine to Romans 5:12. He clearly suggests that “Augustine seems to have worked out his idea of our common sin in Adam before discovering the ‘relevance’ of Romans 5:12. When he did notice it, however, the text became a kind of short-hand way of summing up an already established position.” See Rist (1994), p. 124, n. 93. Rigby (1999) thinks in the same line and refers to other interpreters who defended this view.

To support this view, Augustine tried to clarify his position in the debate between the “creationist” and “traducianist” accounts of the origin of the human soul. According to the former position, which was popular outside North Africa⁵¹ and advocated by most of the Church Fathers preceding Augustine, every individual soul is created by God before birth. This position had been challenged by Tertullian, who thought that such a view would contradict with Genesis 1 (according to which God’s creation was over in the sixth day). On this basis, one had to assume the view that one’s soul, just as one’s body, is handed down from one’s parents through some sort of genetic inheritance. This position, known as Traducianism, was appealing for Augustine, since it gave him the possibility to explain how the negative consequences of original sin has been transmitted into the generations that followed Adam. Hence, beginning with *Ad Simplicianum* I (2.16-22), Augustine defended the view that sin and guilt are physically inherited.⁵² Yet, he always had difficulties in becoming a clear-minded defender of the traducianist position, since it was impossible for him to get rid of the materialistic consequences of such a theory. On the other hand, he has always been reluctant to subscribe to the opposite view, since it was obviously more difficult to reconcile that with his own position: the assumption that every individual soul is freshly created by God would lead him to see them as innocent. For Augustine, the choice of the position in this debate, as well as the problem concerning the origin of the souls, has remained an unsolved affair until the end of his life.⁵³

⁵¹ Rist (1994), p. 317.

⁵² Bonner (1984), p. 506.

⁵³ In his letter to Jerome (*Ep.* 166.3.6.) written in 415, Augustine accepts his ignorance on the subject. Also in *Retractationes* 2.56 (83), he openly admits his ignorance on the problem of the origins of the souls.

Even if Augustine had no clear explanation as to how individual souls came to individual bodies, he was clear about their existence in Adam.⁵⁴ Romans 5:12 (among others) constituted a sufficient evidence for that. Beginning with the *Confessions*, Augustine suggested that before their present lives “as individuals [*singillatim*],” human beings were all happy in Adam “collectively.”⁵⁵ With the sinful death of Adam, all human beings died, because they actually sinned in him.⁵⁶ It is not difficult to imagine the extent to which this idea might have upset a Pelagian and made him think that it is in conflict with Augustine’s position in the *De libero arbitrio*. From their standpoint, what Augustine did was basically to hold individual souls responsible for a sin that they had not committed willingly. According to them, this contradicted not only with Augustine’s earlier writings, but also with a famous Biblical passage that offers solid ground for defending personal responsibility. Ezechiel 18.20, which was a popular reference for the Pelagians, clearly suggests this idea:

The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. (Authorized King James Version)

Augustine was obviously willing to follow this idea. For this reason, in his letter to Bishop Boniface (Letter 98), he referred to Ezechiel 18.4 that shares the spirit of the passage quoted above. On this basis, he argued that Adam’s case was different from that of other ancestors, since we were not yet separate souls when he sinned.⁵⁷ This shows

⁵⁴ Rist (1994), p. 317.

⁵⁵ *Conf.* 10.20 (29). On this point, see Rist (1994), p. 124.

⁵⁶ *Conf.* 10.20 (29) goes as follows: “[...]we have been happy once on a time -either each of us individually or all of us in that man who first sinned and in whom also we all died and from whom we are all born in misery.”

⁵⁷ Rist (1994), pp. 125-126.

that Augustine was unwilling to accept that guilt passed from individual to individual, more or less like a contagious disease. On the very contrary: In order to explain the transmission of the effects of the original sin, he assumed a sort of “pre-individual existence” of souls in one, “collective” individual. In a sense, he took the clause “we all sinned in Adam” in quite a literary way: When Adam sinned, all humanity was literally *contained* in him. For Augustine, this was no different than being one with Adam, as a passage from the *De civitate Dei* suggests: “We were all in that one man since *all of us were that one man* [...]”⁵⁸

In other words, while defending the transmission of the guilt of original sin, Augustine has been very careful to follow the “subjective” aspects of his philosophy, which we already presented in the preceding chapter. For him, the possibility of transmission does not arise from the attribution of some sort of a “permeability” to individual souls, such that one individual can be stained by the guilt of another. The transmission is possible, because there has been a time in which no “personal” borders existed between human beings.

Consequences of the Fall (I): Involuntary Sin

Having touched upon the problem of transmission and the complexities related to it, it is now time to focus on the specific effects of the original sin on Adam’s inheritors. While discussing Adam and Eve’s conditions preceding the fall, we pointed at their possibility to live forever, on the condition that they had not transgressed God’s authority. Hence, the most radical consequence of their sin has been the disappearance of this condition of

⁵⁸ *De civ.* 13.14 (my emphasis)

immortality. But more importantly for our research, the fall had irreversible consequences for the “ethical” and “psychological” aspects of the condition of the fallen humanity: *Voluntas* lost its capacity to make free choices and became doomed to choose evil.⁵⁹ Although it was possible to get rid of the original state of sinfulness through baptism, the damaging effects of Adam’s sin on *voluntas* could not be retrieved. Hence, the idea of “voluntariness” has lost its validity for post-Adamic humanity, and the notion of “involuntary sin” became one of the leading themes of Augustine’s later career.

Augustine introduced the idea of “involuntary sin” in *Contra Fortunatum* (in the passage that we already quoted above), probably written during the period of time that separates the writing of the second and third books of the *De libero arbitrio* (more precisely between 391-393).⁶⁰ For this reason, the idea of involuntary sin, which is absent in the first two books, pervades the third book written in 395. Here, Augustine clearly states that, after the fall, we no longer have the chance to choose to act rightly “because of the resistance of our carnal habit, which develops almost naturally because of the unruliness of our mortal inheritance.”⁶¹ Thus, the notion of sin does not refer exclusively to an act committed through free choice of the will (as in the case of Adam), but also to the *punishment* of “sin in the strict sense.”⁶² “Involuntary sin” is this second type of sin, the one arising not from free choice but from the dominance of carnal habit which developed as the punishment of the original sin. In the same line, the term “human nature” is not always used in its strict sense, i.e. to refer to a nature “blameless

⁵⁹ *Ench.* 30: “And since it is true, I ask you what kind of liberty can one have who is bound as a slave except the liberty that loves to sin? He serves freely who freely does the will of his master. Accordingly he who is slave to sin is free to sin.”

⁶⁰ Alflatt (1974), p. 116

⁶¹ *De lib. arb.* 3.18

⁶² *ibid.*, 3.19.

after its kind,” but also to refer to the corrupted nature of Adam’s descendents who are born “under the penalty of that sin.”⁶³

While developing this idea and the set of concepts related to it, one of Augustine’s main references has been Paul’s suggestion in Romans 7:15: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” This passage constitutes one of the clearest scriptural references that seem to threaten the notion of “voluntary sin” that Augustine put forward in the *De Libero* I and II. It points at a fundamental rupture between the *voluntas* and its acts, since it implies that the agent may do what he/she does not will to do. From a Manichean perspective, this idea calls for the presumption of an alien, evil nature that cancels out the role of *voluntas* in committing sins.⁶⁴ As Terence Irwin suggests, the distinction that Paul makes between the flesh and the spirit seems to foster a Manichean (and quasi-Platonic) interpretation.⁶⁵ In various passages, Paul seems to posit two distinct natures (one rational and the other irrational) that constitute two distinct sources of motivation for the acts of human beings. Such an account, which apparently follows the spirit of ancient Greeks’ moral psychology, threatens the reliability of Augustine’s anti-Manichean conceptions of sin and freedom of choice. For this reason, Augustine is face to face with the difficult task of developing a notion of sin which will be in line with the spirit of the Pauline corpus, but essentially different from its Manichean and “quasi-Platonic” renderings. He should

⁶³ *ibid.* 3.19.

⁶⁴ For other biblical passages that the Manicheans have used against Augustine in order to back up their views, see note 10 above.

⁶⁵ Irwin (2007), pp. 398-400. On the development of the notion of involuntary sin in Augustine, see Alflatt (1974).

elaborate a notion of “involuntary sin” -different from that of the Manicheans-⁶⁶ in which all of the factors that determine one’s choices are to be found within the agent.

A clear expression of this notion is found in *Contra Fortunatum* 22, where Augustine introduces the difference between Adam’s and his inheritors’ condition:

But when by that liberty we have done something [i.e. the original sin] and the pernicious sweetness and pleasure of that deed has taken hold upon the mind, by its own habit [*consuetudine*] the mind is so implicated that afterwards it cannot conquer what by sinning it has fashioned for itself.

The key concept in this passage is *consuetudo*, a term that covers the whole set of habits or dispositions that arise after the fall. These habits constitute some sort of a second nature that, in various occasions, obstructs the path towards the right action. This second nature also takes the form of a second *voluntas* that fosters carnal habits and that thereby impedes the soul’s orientation towards the good. In *Confessions* 8.5 (10), Augustine depicts this situation as a conflict between a new, spiritual *voluntas* that has grown in him after his conversion to God, and the old, carnal *voluntas* that “weighs down” him towards worldly things. These two wills, as *Confessions* 8.5 (11) shows, substitute the terms “flesh” and “spirit” that Paul uses in his letters. After quoting Paul’s letter to the Galatians 5:17,⁶⁷ Augustine depicts his incapability to turn towards God by using a formula that echoes Paul’s words in Romans 7:15:

I truly lusted both ways, yet more in that which I approved in myself than in that which I disapproved in myself. For in the latter it was not now really I that was involved, because here I was rather an unwilling sufferer than a willing actor.

⁶⁶ Wetzel (1992), p. 94.

⁶⁷ “The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh.”

The substitution of Paul's distinction between flesh and spirit by that between the two wills is of prime importance for understanding the novelty of the Augustinian idea of "involuntary sin." This theoretical move is definitely one of the critical outcomes of Augustine's effort to interpret the Pauline corpus in an anti-Manichean way. Instead of interpreting the elements of the dualism as two distinct natures, Augustine tries to "internalize" them, by treating them as two sources of action belonging to the soul itself. Meanwhile, he persists in his effort to prevent any possible dualistic interpretation. To this end, he underlines the personal unity that grounds the battle between the two wills.

The famous scene of conversion narrated in *Confessions* 8.8 (19) presents a thorough illustration of this effort. In the scene that takes place in Milan, Augustine's will to turn towards God is prevented, leading him to understand that "to will was not the same as the ability to act." Augustine realizes that an abyss exists between his acts of will and his tangible acts, since "it was easier for the body to obey the soul's most feeble demands [...than...] to accomplish its own high will [...]." While explaining this abyss, however, Augustine tries to prevent any possible dualism between his mind prescribing laws and the body resisting them (8.9 (21)). If his body seems to act against his will, the reason is not to be found in a power inherent to the body, but rather in the weakness of the act of willing: The mind "does not will in its entirety: for this reason, it does not give this command in its entirety" (8.9 (21)). Yet, this weakness, or the hesitation that leads to it, should be explained with reference to a struggle that takes place between two wills. If one cannot fully will the good, this is because there is another, baser will that prevents it: "Therefore there are two wills, since one of them is not complete, and what is lacking in one of them is present in the other" (8.9 (21)).

Augustine seems to think that this assumption does not fully invalidate the Manichean argument, since it is still open to a dualistic reading. Thus, it is no coincidence that the following chapter (*Conf.* 8.10) is mainly dedicated to defeating the arguments of his old enemies. Augustine's first step is to assure his readers that the assumption of the existence of two wills should by no means lead one to suppose that there exists distinct agents within the soul: "it was I myself who willed it and I myself who did not will it" (8.10 (22)). What was happening was therefore an internal collision, a war within the same self. The devastating consequences of this war were not to be attributed to an alien mind having a different nature. The carnal will, which was responsible for the uncontrolled actions of the soul, was the product of the punishment of man's own nature. Even if this carnal will seems to act on oneself "against [one's] will," it would be wrong to look for its source outside oneself. In order to internalize the dualism, Augustine points at the fundamental ambiguity that belongs to the grounding phenomenon of the history of humanity, which is the original sin:

Therefore, it is no more I that did it, but *sin that dwells in me*, sin that issues from punishment of a more voluntary sin, *for I was Adam's son*. (*Conf.* 8.10 (22)-my emphasis)

One might nevertheless get the impression that sin or, as Augustine says elsewhere, the carnal habit that acts like a second will, is nevertheless defined here in a virtually Manichean way, i.e. as "other in the self." However, the "otherness" of the sin relates only to the way it is *experienced* by the mind, and not to its true source. Insofar as it is the punishment of Adam's sin, the responsibility of the development of this carnal habit belongs to all human beings who "sinned in him." The very fact that this carnal habit is experienced as the operation of an alien nature is, in fact, a part of this righteous

punishment. From this standpoint, the principal illusion of the Manicheans seems to result from their confusion between the source of the carnal habit and the way in which it is experienced.

At this point, one might wonder why Augustine is so insistent on adhering to the vocabulary of *voluntas*, and suggesting that two wills are at war in himself. The main reason might be the role that he gave to *voluntas* in his early writings, mostly written as a part of an anti-Manichean agenda. When he relates his inability to turn towards God to the weakness of his own self, he wants to rely exclusively on the explanatory power of *voluntas*: If *voluntas* cannot turn towards good things, this means that it is divided against itself and that it has two aspects -one spiritual and the other carnal. If *voluntas* wages war against a rival, this can only be another *voluntas*.

One should also bear in mind that Augustine's use of *voluntas* in *Confessions* 8.10 oscillates between the two senses of the term. On the one hand, he talks about *voluntas* as a source of action that once had the power to choose freely. On the other hand, he uses the term in order to refer to an act of volition of a unified soul. Accordingly, when a human being seems to be pulled to different orientations, what happens is not a fight between two natures, but rather the wavering of one single soul between two wills, i.e. two different volitions.

Augustine's narration of the scene in the garden at Milan, together with the detailed interpretation that follows, may be found confusing and unconvincing. One may think that the indeterminacy of Augustine's use of *voluntas*, as well as the complexities and ambiguities introduced by his conception of original sin, seem to fall short of

silencing the Manichean objections.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Augustine's strategy for escaping the Manichean implications of his theory of involuntary sin is of central importance for understanding his description of human condition. Various aspects of this description will be revisited in the following sections.

Concupiscence is arguably the most central ethical notion that reflects the experience of involuntary sin. It is, in a sense, the key to understand the radical contrast between the first two human beings and their descendants. Before the fall, as we have already suggested, Adam and Eve did not experience any concupiscence, since they had complete control over their acts, including those related with the activity of procreation. One of the central consequences of God's punishment for the original sin has been the impossibility to have sexual intercourse without losing control over the body.

However, to capture the true significance of the experience of concupiscence, we should bear in mind that Augustine uses it to refer to a continuous psychological state rather than a momentary emotive reaction. As John M. Rist suggests, the significance of the term has changed as Augustine's doctrine on the post-Adamic condition of humanity gained centrality and detail. In the beginning, Rist argues, concupiscence referred to an active attitude exemplified in various concrete acts. As Augustine's theory of the fallen condition of man developed, the term began to refer to a fundamental defect or permanent weakness deeply influencing the condition of humanity. Unlike the ancient Greeks' *akrasia*, concupiscence began to be considered as an "all-pervasive" state that

⁶⁸ See Wetzell (1992), p. 169

significantly shaped the moral psychology of the fallen man.⁶⁹ It is a state in which the status of the human being *qua* agent is at peril: Through concupiscence, the condition of “*posse non peccare*”⁷⁰ that Adam and Eve experienced comes to an end, and an essential disability to prevent sin, described as the condition of “*non posse non peccare*,” becomes dominant.⁷¹ *Voluntas* loses its ethical centrality due to its fundamental and inevitable inclination towards evil. The freedom to choose becomes an illusion and the evil becomes the sole possible object of the will’s choice. The resulting state of bondage is thoroughly described by Augustine in numerous passages that constitute the gist of what may be called “the Augustinian pessimism:”⁷²

The whole mass of the human race stood condemned, lying ruined and wallowing in evil, being plunged from evil into evil and, having joined causes with the angels who had sinned, it was paying the fully deserved penalty for impious desertion.⁷³

Insofar as he/she is a part of the *massa damnata*, a human being has no personal means to escape from this state of bondage and to lead himself/herself towards salvation. For this reason, Augustine’s depiction of the human condition following the fall gives central place to the notion of divine grace. Hence, grace becomes the key element of the Augustinian soteriology, introducing the element of hope and thereby cancelling the possible pessimistic consequences of the Augustinian anthropology.

As we have suggested in the previous sections, humanity before the fall had a fundamental dependence on God, in the sense that the sustainability of man’s orientation

⁶⁹ Rist (1994), pp. 136-137.

⁷⁰ Solignac (1993), pp. 101-103

⁷¹ *ibid.*, pp.123-127

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 126.

⁷³ *Ench.* 27.

towards the good was possible only with God's sufficient grace [*adjutorium sine qua non*]. After the fall, this dependency gains a totally new dimension: While in Adam's time grace was needed for the continuation of good deeds, after the fall, it becomes necessary for the accomplishment of any single good act.⁷⁴ In this sense, this new, efficient grace [*adjutorium quo*] is much more than a support: It is the only positive force that orients humanity towards salvation.

Unsurprisingly, this essential dependency on God's grace for salvation has been one of the main aspects of the Augustinian thought that constantly irritated the Pelagians. As a matter of fact, Augustine's succinct formula in *Confessions* 10.31 (45) ("Give what you command and command what you will.") led Pelagius to anger and was probably a motivating force for him to write *De Natura*.⁷⁵ For the Pelagians, giving a central role to God's grace had the risk of nullifying the role of *voluntas* and its freedom of choice. For Augustine, on the other hand, there is no fundamental tension between the capacity of free choice and the centrality of divine grace. Freedom of choice and salvation through grace are not mutually exclusive elements of the same human condition, but are, in fact, two central notions belonging to two different phases of the history of humanity. For him, divine grace becomes central and indispensable only when *voluntas* is deeply injured and becomes unable to orient human beings towards the good. In this sense, the over-growing centrality of the theme of grace in the Augustinian corpus does not result from a change in Augustine's ideas, but rather from a shift in his

⁷⁴ Rist (1994), p. 130.

⁷⁵ TeSelle (1999), p. 635

focus. Grace gains importance and, as Augustine suggests, it “conquers,”⁷⁶ because the post-Adamic condition of humanity becomes the main preoccupation of Augustine.

Consequences of the Fall (II): Longing for Happiness

The rule of carnal habits, the all-pervasiveness of concupiscence and the inevitable bondage to sin: All of these reflect various aspects of the deeply problematic ethical situation of the post-Adamic humanity. However, the impact of the original sin on Adam’s descendents does not only have ethical but also serious psychological dimensions, insofar as it leads to a particular vision of life and a general state of mind accompanying it. In the following pages, we will show how human beings’ post-Adamic condition is deeply marked by the experience of an over-growing distance from God and a state of longing for a lost, authentic relation with Him.

This idea of longing for God and for the true happiness finds its ground in the nature of the ontological relationship between the soul and its Creator. We already suggested that the Plotinian philosophy gave Augustine the possibility to envisage an essential familiarity between the individual soul and God, based on the incorporeality of both. The nature of this relationship is described by Augustine with reference to the central biblical passage on this issue, which is Genesis 1:26: “Let us make man in our image after our likeness.” The creation *ad imaginem*, for Augustine, gives the key to the essential affinity between God and human beings. Insofar as he owns a mind [*mens*] that makes him capable of pursuing rational activity and participating in wisdom, the “inner

⁷⁶ *Retr.* 2.27

man” has an essential likeness to God.⁷⁷ During the period following the original sin, however, human beings find themselves in what Augustine calls in the *Confessions* “the region of unlikeness.”⁷⁸ Accordingly, the loss of the image and the resulting alienation from God is for Augustine the most critical result of the fall.

However, it is necessary to have a subtler understanding of the significance of the loss provoked by the fall. As Gerald Bonner remarks, Augustine’s early writings seem to suggest that the original sin led to a complete obliteration of the image of God in man.⁷⁹ The traces of this idea can also be found in some of Augustine’s later writings such as *De Genesi Ad Litteram*, where the central consequence of Adam’s sin is described as the loss of the image of God. This argument, however, will later be modified in *Retractationes*: The loss of the image should be understood as a deformation and not as a complete disappearance of the likeness. For this reason, there is still hope for reformation and salvation.⁸⁰ There is, therefore, some sort of a residual likeness to God that puts the human being into an intermediary ontological position: Even if he cannot maintain his original affinity with God, he still holds the traces of this initial mode of existence and hopes to reinstitute a deeper relationship with his Creator.

This residual likeness to God is the key to understanding the essential tension that haunts the post-Adamic existence. As we already mentioned in Chapter IV, the *De libero arbitrio* suggests that all human beings, including those immersed in evil, desire to be happy. In the *Confessions*, Augustine introduces a new, psychological dimension

⁷⁷ *De div. quaest.* 51.4. For a detailed account of Augustine’s view on this subject, see Bonner (1984).

⁷⁸ *Conf.* 7.10 (16)

⁷⁹ Bonner (1984), p. 504.

⁸⁰ *Retr.* 2.25 (51)

to this picture: The desire to be happy is not to be conceived simply as a natural disposition that human beings have, but as a concrete psychological phenomenon that may have, so to speak, a “historical” basis.⁸¹ For this reason, the problem of memory occupies a central position in explaining the necessity of human beings’ need for happiness. *Memoria*, as the account in *Confessions X* shows, is much more than a technical term illuminating a particular set of cognitive phenomena. It is indeed the very source of the desire for happiness, which is common to all human beings without exception. The reflection on the desire to be happy leads one to consider the possibility that the human beings have already known the happy life:

Concerning this knowledge, I am perplexed as to whether it is in memory, for if it is there, then all of us have already been happy at some period, either each of us individually, or all of us together in that man who first sinned, in whom we all died, and from whom we are all born in misery. Of this last I do not now inquire, but I inquire whether the happy life is in the memory.⁸²

Here, Augustine does not put forward the assumption that all human beings experienced happiness in Adam; he only mentions it as a possibility. What is significant, however, is that he describes the human condition on the basis of the memory of an essential state of happiness. Even if we cannot be sure about the source of this memory, the search for happiness is experienced by Adam’s descendents as the search for something lost, the

⁸¹ In fact, this kind of a “historical” explanation is mentioned as a possibility in the *De libero arbitrio* too: “[S]ince wisdom is in the soul, whether the soul lived in another life before it was joined to the body and whether at one time it lived in a state of wisdom is a great question, a great mystery to be considered in its proper place. (*De lib. arb.* 1.12.24 - my emphasis).” The first possibility, which echoes the Platonic idea of immortality of the soul and reincarnation, will later be abandoned by Augustine. As we will see, it is not even mentioned in the *Confessions*.

⁸² *Conf.* 10.20 (29)

traces of which can be found in each particular mind. As in the case of Plotinus, the search takes the form of an odyssey, a return to a more authentic state of existence.⁸³

It is possible to conceive Augustine's main ethical enterprise as a strategy to cope with the consequences of this essential state of longing for the lost happiness. This memory has a fundamental positive ethical role for Augustine, since it is what orients human beings towards the search for the true happiness in God. On the other hand, this same memory is also what gives the human existence its deepest tension: There is always the possibility that this search is pursued on the wrong ground, among perishable worldly things.⁸⁴ The result is an endless series of leaps from one external object to another, in such a way that the search for happiness takes the form of a pointless vagabondage, instead of becoming a genuine odyssey.

As Augustine's account of involuntary sin shows, it is not easy to give an end to this vagabondage and the "restlessness of heart"⁸⁵ resulting from it, since human life is continuously threatened by the uncontrolled movements of the soul. In paradise, where sin could only be voluntary, man did not have a will to do what he could not do. Now, in the post-Adamic world, there are countless things that a human being wills to do, even if he/she has no capacity for doing them.⁸⁶ This tension can never come to an end in the worldly life, since true happiness cannot be reached in this world. Nevertheless, there is the possibility to reach a "lower" state of happiness, the one that human beings can reach

⁸³ René Desjardin refers to this parallelism between Augustine's search for God and the Plotinian idea of forgetting and remembering the One (*En.* 6.1.1). See Desjardin (1975), Ch. 3.

⁸⁴ Huftier (1964) gives a vivid description of this state of existence. See esp. p. 79.

⁸⁵ Augustine uses this term in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*: "Yet man, this part of your creation, wishes to praise you. You arouse him to take joy in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (my emphasis).

⁸⁶ *De civ.* 14.15

through hope.⁸⁷ In this sense, the notion of hope is the first key to get rid of the negative consequences of this essential state of longing that shapes the human experience of life. There is, however, no ultimate way to completely eradicate this feeling of longing in this world. The best that one can do is to long for true happiness by internalizing hope.

To the extent that the sense of longing is an almost indispensable part of the human experience, the grief [*tristitia*] gains a positive connotation in Augustine's description of worldly life. As James Wetzel shows, this situation constitutes one of the apparent contrasts between the Augustinian and the Stoic conceptions of wisdom. While the Stoics' search for wisdom is oriented towards an ultimate eradication of the feeling of grief (together with all other *pathê*), Augustine gives it a positive function: Insofar as human beings endure the punishment of the original sin, grief is a necessary part of their life experience. For this reason, Augustine seems to think that "even the Christian saints retain grief within wisdom."⁸⁸ As Wetzel shows, this idea is in open contrast with the Stoic ethical enterprise, according to which feelings, for the wise, can only arise as the outcome of external conditions. Since the Stoic wisdom is a state in which all feelings are eradicated by being incorporated into rational procedures, the wise has no longer any inner disposition to experience grief. In Augustine, however, wisdom by no means leads to such a state of *apatheia*. What makes the wise (or the saint) different from ordinary people is not his being free from all feelings and passions, but his ability to know the appropriate significations of those. In such a context, grief becomes relevant and useful for Christians' life experience.

⁸⁷ *Conf.* 10.20 (29)

⁸⁸ Wetzel (1992), p. 109.

This contrast with Stoicism shows us another significant distinctive characteristic of the Augustinian thought. Throughout his description of the worldly human condition, Augustine introduces a radical sense of finitude into the experience of life. We think that this unending state of longing represents another aspect of Augustine's distance from Greek eudemonism. While in his earlier texts such as *De Beata Vita* or *De libero arbitrio* Augustine sees in wisdom a power to protect the wise from evil, his position changes in his later writings.⁸⁹ No state of wisdom, as the Stoics would understand it, is possible in this world, since even the saint is malleable to temptation. The worldly life is constantly under the threat of the involuntary sin, and the true happiness is always "beyond."⁹⁰

The fact that the Augustinian depiction of human condition was deeply marked by the sense of finitude and longing will be of prime importance for our account of tragedy to be presented in the next chapter. But before concluding our presentation of the "anti-Pelagian" aspects of Augustine's thought, we will reflect on the possibility and the pertinence of using the adjective "tragic" in qualifying the Augustinian conception of humanity.

Augustine and the "Tragic Vision"

In our "Introduction," we made the preliminary statement that the present work has no intention to find a hidden tragedian in Augustine, or to label his worldview as "tragic" in any sense of the term. In fact, we subscribe to the widely-accepted view that a consistent defense of the Christian worldview should, at some point, lead to the exclusion of any

⁸⁹ For a detailed account of this change of position, see Wetzel (1992), esp. Ch. 2, 3 and 4.

⁹⁰ Huftier (1964), p.81.

sort of “tragic vision.” In this respect, we follow Laurence Michel in maintaining that the term “Christian tragedy” contains a contradiction in terms: “Christianity is intransigent to tragedy; tragedy bucks and balks under Christianity.”⁹¹ The doctrine of incarnation, together with the related themes of hope and salvation, constitute the main elements of a project which is essentially and deliberately anti-tragic in spirit.

This, however, should not mean that a philosophical reflection on the pertinence of using the adjective “tragic” in Augustine’s case is utterly pointless. Even if it has the risk of distorting the spirit of Augustine’s thought, we think that such a reflection may nevertheless have the merit of illuminating *some aspects* of both the Augustinian thought and the notion of “tragic.” Since our last chapter will mainly revolve around the post-Renaissance “tragic problematization” and the contributions of Augustine to its development, it would be worth taking the risk of mentioning Augustine’s name and the adjective “tragic” in the same sentence.

In what follows, therefore, we will highlight two focal points in the Augustinian worldview -the original sin and the post-Adamic humanity- that might inspire the development of a tragic worldview. We shall consider these aspects as the two specific “tragic” moments of the Augustinian thought, which are balanced by other, positive aspects.

⁹¹ Michel (1963), p. 232. Richard B. Sewall agrees with Michel’s views, but he still continues to use the term “Christian tragedy” to refer to tragic works “written in the Christian era which bears the mark of Christian thought and feeling, however short it falls of the doctrines of the Church.” See Sewall (1959), pp. 162-163. Chapter 5 of Sewall’s book (the chapter entitled “Tragedy and Christianity”) is dedicated to this subject.

The Original Sin

In our discussion of the “tragic” dimensions of Augustine’s interpretation of the original sin, we will have recourse to Paul Ricœur’s hermeneutical reading of the myth of the fall, since he discusses the problem with reference to and in comparison with a “tragic” account for the existence of evil.

The inexplicability occupies a central place in Paul Ricœur’s analysis of the myth of original sin.⁹² Ricœur begins his analysis by carefully emphasizing the great distance separating the Greek tragic conception of divinity from that of the Biblical God. As Ricœur remarks, with the God of the Old Testament, creation is no longer a “struggle,” as it was in the case of Greek theogony, but “word:” God says and it is.⁹³ The myth of the fall, from such a perspective, is anti-tragic: It leaves intact the idea of God’s sanctity and the sinfulness of man. Nevertheless, Ricœur argues, the tragic myth of the fall reaffirms something of the tragic man and even of the tragic god.⁹⁴ According to him, the first “tragic” element that the myth contains is the figure of the serpent which, in a sense, represents the evil that is “already-there.” By following the significance of this figure, Ricœur argues, we can reach the conclusion that man’s evil is only secondary, insofar as it is the outcome of seduction. Adam becomes evil only by being exposed to the impact of an already existing source of evil and by giving consent to it.⁹⁵

It would be interesting to see how Augustine dealt with this aspect of the myth which, according to Ricœur, introduces tragic dimensions into the Biblical depiction of

⁹² For this analysis, see Ricœur (1988), pp. 374-416 and pp. 445-459. Note that Ricœur’s interpretation here is not based on the Augustinian version of the myth of the fall, but on the Bible itself.

⁹³ Ricœur (1988), p. 381

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 445

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 398

human existence. As for the serpent, we might clearly say that Augustine took a series of theoretical precautions to prevent any “tragic” reading of the myth. Given the overall intentions of the Augustinian ethical enterprise, these precautions are predictable and indispensable: Giving any kind of primary role to the serpent would obviously introduce a Manichean element into Augustine’s philosophy and would thereby threaten his solution to the problem of theodicy. In such a case, Augustine would be forced to accept that evil was “already there” in the form of the serpent and that Adam’s sin was evil only in a secondary sense, an evil that arises out of seduction. There are in fact some passages in Book XIV of *De civitate* that might lead one to think that Augustine sees the original sin as the outcome of deception. In 14.11, he seems to emphasize the role of the “proud angel” who, after his fall from Paradise, used the serpent to deceive Adam and Eve. The serpent deliberately targeted Eve, since she was “the lower member of that human couple” and for this reason more disposed to be deceived. Adam followed her, not because he was deceived in his turn (here Augustine refers to I Timothy 2.14), but due to “the close bond of their alliance.” Up to this point, Augustine may seem to emphasize the passivity of both Eve and Adam at the moment in which they are faced with the devil’s intrigues. However, Augustine reaches the conclusion that all of these should by no means diminish the weight of Adam’s sin. For him, Eve’s deception -in contrast to Adam’s- consists in her inability to realize that what she does is sin. However, argues Augustine, once we accept that Adam is not deceived, we understand clearly that he was aware of the sinful character of his act. In a sense, the lack of deception is what makes Adam’s sin voluntary in the clearest sense of the term.

In a later passage, Augustine takes one further step to minimize the devil's active role in the original sin:

Accordingly, the devil would not have trapped man by the overt and manifest sin of doing what God had forbidden to be done if man had not already begun to be pleased with himself.⁹⁶

This means that Adam's *superbia* precedes his act of transgression, as well as Eve's deception. Augustine explicitly claims that the fall as an observable event was preceded by another fall that took place in secret: a fall that resulted from Adam's being delighted in himself. *Superbia*, in this sense, has been a more serious event than the act of transgression, because it was what prepared Adam to follow Eve's deceitful act and to eat the fruit. Moreover, both Adam and Eve persisted in their *superbia* even after they had realized that what they did was a sin. Instead of begging for pardon, they both tried to find excuses for their misdeed.⁹⁷ In this sense, their *superbia* was a heavier sin compared to their act of transgression, since the latter would not be possible without the former. It is possible to observe here how Augustine, in refuting the existence of any extenuating circumstance in Adam's sin, changes his focus from the deed to the doer: The observable act of transgression is seen only as secondary to the inner psychological processes of the agent who is involved in the act. And these inner processes constitute sin in the proper sense of the term.

Therefore, we might accept that Augustine, by his emphasis on the inner mechanisms of the sinner, prevented any tragic (or Manichean) interpretation of the myth. This brings us to the second "tragic" element of the myth that Ricœur mentions:

⁹⁶ *De civ.* 14.13

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 14.14. Augustine refers to Genesis 3:13, where, having realized their sins, Eve says "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate" and Adam continues "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

Adam's condition of peccability before the concrete moment of sin. In fact, in Ricoeur's analysis of the Biblical myth, the serpent does not constitute the main tragic element of the narrative. Before the serpent, a deeper tragic dimension opens up with the very figure of Adam himself. According to Ricoeur,

[t]his figure thematizes a mystery of iniquity which is by no means reducible to the clear consciousness of the actual evil, of the evil that begins in the instant; it points towards a ground of peccability.⁹⁸

Ricoeur, through his hermeneutical reading of the myth, tries to show how the Biblical narrative points at the presence of an evil which is "already there" before the appearance of the serpent and the concrete act of sin.⁹⁹ The notion of original sin, for him, is a "pseudo-thought" developed with a view to hide this ground of peccability. In this sense, it is nothing more than a "knot of speculation" to be entangled, in order to come back to the concept of some kind of evil which is "already there" and antecedent to the concrete act.¹⁰⁰ Elsewhere, Ricoeur reconsiders the concept of "original sin" with special reference to Augustine, since he believes that he should be held responsible for the classical elaboration of this term.¹⁰¹ He thinks that the notion of "original sin" is the product of an anti-Gnostic intention and that its primary function is the introduction of an original voluntary act to the explanation of the preliminary existence of evil in post-Adamic humanity. However, Ricoeur continues, "the concept of original sin becomes quasi-Gnostic to the degree that it is rationalized."¹⁰² Even if Augustine, through his

⁹⁸ Ricoeur (1988), p. 445 (my translation)

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 446

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 445-446.

¹⁰¹ Ricoeur (1974), p. 278.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 280.

complex strategy, tried to prevent any Manichean consequence, his thought is still pointing towards the “radical” existence of evil.¹⁰³

One should keep in mind that Ricœur’s above-presented thought is not based exclusively on a close reading of Augustine’s texts. As he explains in detail, it is the product of an original hermeneutical approach that treats original sin as what he calls a “rational symbol,” and not simply as a philosophical or a theological concept. This idea of rational symbol is based on the assumption that concepts have no consistency, but that they “refer back to expressions that are analogous” and invite us to “come back to the enormous burden of meaning contained in prerational symbols.”¹⁰⁴ In this sense, it would be fruitless and improper to evaluate Ricœur’s hermeneutical reading by staying within the confines of the Augustinian corpus. We think that this reading is valuable in showing us a possible set of significations that the Augustinian thought tries to hide through the creation of what Ricœur calls the “pseudo-concept” of original sin.

On this basis, we can try to discover the extent to which Augustine himself tries to escape the “tragic” consequences of his theory of original sin. We agree with Ricœur that Augustine’s initial intention is to combat the Pelagian worldview without falling prey to Manichean suggestions. His strategy consists in finding a quasi-Pelagian historical basis for the actual, quasi-Manichean state of affairs dominated by involuntary sin. He makes, so to speak, a risky tightrope walk above a dangerous theological ground filled with Manichean and Pelagian notions and presuppositions. Here, one might say, Adam’s state of *posse non peccare* constitutes the chief element that guards the

¹⁰³ Alfred Vanneste also thinks in the same line and argues that there is a sort of “natural concupiscence” in human beings, in the sense that there is always the possibility to choose evil. See Vanneste (1971), p. 79.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 281-282.

Augustinian thought against Manichean -and tragic- interpretations. Our bondage to evil, as well as our condition of mortality and fragility, is the consequence of Adam's voluntary sin. It is by no means an aspect belonging to man's primitive nature.¹⁰⁵ This means that sin did not have a primordial presence and that it made its historical entrance through man's own will.

Therefore, we would like to argue that what makes the tragic interpretation of Augustine's thought possible is not the quasi-Manichean status of evil. Even if its ultimate success is disputable, it is obvious that Augustine's strategy was mainly shaped by the intention to prevent such a Manichean conclusion. In this sense, Augustine's theory of original sin, at least in its initial intentions, was deliberately anti-tragic. Nevertheless, we think that the adjective "tragic" can be used to illuminate one particular aspect of this theory. As we have explained above, Augustine's theory of original sin contains a blind spot, when the *exact reason* for Adam's sin is taken into consideration: Augustine does not give any clear explanation for Adam's *superbia* and the causal chain leading to this fundamental moment of disloyalty. *Voluntas*, according to him, can have no other cause than itself.

In his account of the Augustinian theory of original sin, Goulven Madec suggests that Adam's *superbia* contains a "*tragique absurdité*." Accordingly, it would be mistaken to conceive of Adam's *voluntas* (which is not perverted yet) as a "pure and

¹⁰⁵ *Ad Simp.* 1.11: "Il est certain, en effet, que le vouloir lui-même est de notre pouvoir, puisqu'il est à notre portée; mais qu'accomplir le bien ne soit pas en notre pouvoir, cela tient au châtement du péché original. Cette impuissance, en effet, ne tient pas à la première nature de l'homme, mais elle est la peine du péché." Mathewes' depiction of this situation is worthy of citing here: "Augustine tried to avoid the extremes of his opponents by arguing that evil is, in its essence (or in whatever it has that is close to an "essence"), in us, in the form of sin; but it is not primordially in us, it is there in a sort of secondary way, in some sense as a violation of our natural order and goodness, a sort of "second nature." See Mathewes (2004), p. 73.

transcendent initiative of the soul” that is able to act in accordance with a complete knowledge of the causes.¹⁰⁶ For him, conceiving Adam primarily as an ethical agent only partly helps us to uncover the psychological processes leading him to sin. What leads Adam to his act of transgression is not an observable and understandable inner orientation but, to use John M. Rist’s terms, an “inexplicable submission to pride.”¹⁰⁷ This inexplicability, Madec seems to suggest, is what calls for the use of the term “tragic” to qualify the phenomenon of original sin. In this sense, Madec’s reference to a tragic absurdity does not take departure from any kind of parallelism between the respective cosmologies of Augustine and the ancient Greek tragedians. The adjective “tragic” here is used to refer to the enigmatic nature of the first sin when it is considered from the limited human perspective.

If, therefore, the adjective “tragic” is to be used to qualify some aspects of the Augustinian theory, its meaning should be derived from this element of inexplicability. From such a standpoint, what is tragic in the Augustinian narrative of Adam is not the inevitability of sin. Ricœur may very well be (and we think that he is) right in finding in the Biblical myth an element that hints at the “already there-ness” of the evil. But as far as the Augustinian interpretation of the myth is concerned, we think that the theory (or, as Ricœur calls it, the “pseudo-concept”) of original sin is a serious attempt to cancel out this kind of tragic connotation: Augustine’s primary goal is to prove that evil is not “radical” and that it does not *necessarily* belong to the initial, primitive nature of man. If there is anything “tragic” about the original sin, it is its *inexplicable contingency*: Evil that haunts human existence has made its entrance through the free choice of one

¹⁰⁶ Madec (2001), p. 253.

¹⁰⁷ Rist (1993), p. 190.

(“collective”) individual, through a choice which is inexplicable insofar as it is voluntary. The element of voluntariness endowed the first human beings with a “finite freedom,” to use Ricœur’s terms, which may be the source of both good and evil. This finite freedom, for an inexplicable reason, began to strive for a “bad infinity,” and thereby gave way to an “infinite desire” that led Adam to *superbia*.¹⁰⁸ Human beings’ capacity for choice, by its very nature, contains this “vertigo of infinity”¹⁰⁹ as a frightening possibility. This is the “moment” when the “tragic” appears, not as a part of the objective constitution of the cosmos, but as a fundamental risk that haunts the condition of humanity, which is marked by an essential finitude.

The Fallen Condition

Since the phenomenon of the fall leads to the disappearance of voluntary choice, it would be improper to find in post-Adamic life the same “tragic” dimension that we have found in Adam and Eve. The choice of evil is no longer a matter of inexplicable human contingency, but rather the result of a quasi-natural predisposition, which is the punishment for a past, voluntary evil. And since this new condition of bondage to sin is explained as a punishment, it seems possible to consider it in exclusively moral terms: All suffering that human beings experience in their lives can somehow be traced back into a moral origin, which is Adam’s sin. Hence, by explaining the present suffering through a historical scenario starting with Adam’s sin and ending with salvation, the Augustinian problematization of action gains a fundamentally ethical character. In other

¹⁰⁸ Ricœur (1974), p. 395.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 397.

words, when one considers the Augustinian picture in its entirety, one realizes that the condition of bondage to evil has both a moral cause and an ultimate remedy.

Nevertheless, we still think that the Augustinian description of the post-Adamic life comports some elements that may inspire a tragic problematization. If one isolates the present experience of evil from the more general historical scenario that explains it, one may legitimately think that Augustine's account has a tragic aspect: Human being is not only malleable to suffering and death, but also doomed to sin sooner or later.

Moreover, as Augustine's theory of efficient grace tells us, a human being's salvation from this miserable condition depends entirely on God's decision. One may even argue that Augustine comes close to his Manichean adversaries in the way he describes the *experience* of evil in the world. Even if the source of evil and suffering is explained in utterly non-Manichean terms, *the way these are experienced* in the present condition may well be associated with the Manicheans' (and even Greek tragedians') objective notion of evil. What is critical from our standpoint is to find out whether such a similarity has any philosophical relevance for our argument.

In questioning the relevance of this similarity, we think that it would be congruent to turn back to ancient Greek tragedy and its objective notion of human error. The experience of *miasma* constitutes a good point of focus in this context, since, as we have explained in the second chapter of the present thesis, it is arguably the most typical phenomenon that reflects the objectivity of error in archaic Greek culture: *Miasma* points towards the essentially contagious character of human misdeeds, since it makes it difficult for us to make a distinction between the *personal* and *transpersonal* aspects of those. In Oedipus' case, to take the most famous example, the personal misdeed leads to

a curse that has obviously transpersonal consequences affecting the entire city of Thebes. In Agamemnon's case, the misfortunes that ruin the house of Atreidae are constantly traced back to Atreus' misdeed, which is personal in its source but transpersonal in its consequences.

Would it be possible and meaningful to find a parallelism between Oedipus' and Atreus' misdeeds on the one hand and Adam's original sin on the other? Can we say that Adam's sin has both of these personal and transpersonal qualities and, as a result, the same "objectivity"? The influential article of Aimé Solignac¹¹⁰ can be a good starting-point, since he uses the terms "personal" and "transpersonal" while explaining the nature of sin after Adam:

In its personal aspect, it influences the essential features of human destiny; in its transpersonal aspect, it aims to pass from one individual to another. What characterizes sin is a double movement, or a double dialectic: In the sinner, it tends to be developed into a multiplicity of sins; outside of the sinner, it tends to contaminate those who partake of the same spiritual destiny.¹¹¹

In order to illustrate the transpersonal character of sin, Solignac uses the term "to contaminate," which recalls us the experience of *miasma*. This transpersonal character turns the sin into an almost independent entity which seems to have an objective existence in human beings' lives. On this basis, one can find a parallelism between the Greek experience of *miasma* and the post-Adamic experience of sin: In both cases, a personal evil gains a transpersonal character.

¹¹⁰ "La Condition de l'homme pécheur d'après St. Augustin" in *Studies in Early Christianity* (ed. Ferguson), v. 10, New York; London: Garland, pp. 101-130

¹¹¹ See Solignac (1993), pp. 126-127 (my translation). Note that Solignac focuses here on the Augustinian interpretation of the phenomenon of original sin and makes no reference to the Greek *miasma*.

However, there is a fundamental difference between the respective transpersonal characters of *miasma* and of the post-Adamic sin. As we have already explained, the transpersonal operation of *miasma* presupposes the absence of clear-cut boundaries between the inner and the outer, between the agent and the surrounding forces. The reason why *miasma* gains a contagious form is that it can transgress personal boundaries, penetrate into human beings and unite them under a common experience. In the case of the post-Adamic experience of sin, however, the transpersonal quality of evil does not depend on the permeability of personal boundaries. As the Augustinian anthropology suggests, each human being has his/her own personal existence and “private”¹¹² inner life. The reason why the sin is transpersonal is not that it passes from one individual to another by way of contagion, but that it has a historical origin common to all human beings: *All* humanity sinned in Adam.¹¹³

In this sense, the term “to contaminate” that Solignac uses should be taken in a metaphorical sense, if not totally ignored. In the post-Adamic world, evil is *experienced* in such a way that one has the impression of being conquered by an uncontrollable force external to the agent. In reality, what is happening in the experience of sin is not the rule of an external force, but the inevitably erroneous operation of internal forces (especially of *voluntas*). Each particular sin can be traced back into the agent’s inner source of action, i.e. his *voluntas*, which lost its capacity to choose the good. In this sense, what is transpersonal is not this or that particular sin, but the internal corruption that leads to each one of them. What is objective, therefore, is not *the sin itself*, but rather *the condition* that pushes each human being towards sinning. The transpersonal quality of

¹¹² About the “privacy” of the Augustinian inner self, see Chapter IV of the present thesis.

¹¹³ See p. 189 of the present thesis.

Adam's personal sin is observed in the transformation that it has caused in his descendents, and not in the objective, independent quality of the sin itself. Each sin is personal (and "subjective," as we argued in Chapter IV), but the underlying condition is transpersonal, universal and "objective."

Hence, if we would like to attribute any objectivity to sin after the fall, we should be careful to clarify that we use the term "objective" in order to depict what may be called "the human condition," and not the sin itself. For this reason, it would be improper to formulate the Augustinian experience of post-Adamic sin by having recourse to the notion of "objective error." The error, or the sin, is always personal and "subjective." What is objective in Augustine is not the error itself, but an *essential fallibility* that shapes the human condition. Since the fall, human beings are *objectively* inclined to evil and they can have no personal way out of this condition. This objective inclination is what makes the experience of sin a complex phenomenon that cannot be fully explained within the boundaries of an "ethical problematization."¹¹⁴

In conclusion, if Augustine's account of humanity has an aspect that may be incorporated into a tragic problematization, it is the objective and universal quality of this fallibility. By tracing back this condition of fallibility into Adam's purely moral error, Augustine seems to prevent any possible tragic conclusion. However, as we hope to show in the following chapter, this picture of human condition will inspire a new tragic problematization after the Renaissance.

¹¹⁴ This is why Pierre Watté, while describing the post-Adamic condition, points towards a rather paradoxical situation: "Hence Augustine seems to simultaneously argue that the evil is and is not nature, that it depends and does not depend on the individual will." Watté (1974), p. 33 (my translation).

PART III: TRAGIC ERROR AFTER THE RENAISSANCE

CHAPTER VI

POST-AUGUSTINIAN TRAGEDY: RACINE AND SHAKESPEARE

As we have already suggested in Chapter II, Kierkegaard thinks that tragic error gains an ethical quality when it is possible to point at a responsible agent whose condition may be evaluated in isolation from the surrounding factors.¹ Hence, when a seemingly tragic plot revolves around Pelagian type of agents, there arises no ambiguity in the ethical assessment of the actions: Agents are either innocent or guilty. This is the case in modern plays where the element of “destiny,” so central for ancient tragedies, becomes (or in Kierkegaard’s own terms, “is transubstantiated” into) “individuality and substantiality.”² It is important to note that for Kierkegaard, this transformation does not simply lead to a modification in the tragic problematization of life, but to the utter disappearance of such an outlook: By adopting an atomistic conception of the individual, the age loses the tragic and gains despair.³ In this respect, Kierkegaard’s account goes well beyond a simple description of the historical transformation of the tragic worldview. It is also a critique of the modern, Pelagian notion of individuality. Hence, Kierkegaard’s argument implies that the existence of a tragic vision is intrinsically related to the possibility of treating human guilt in “objective” terms.

Although Kierkegaard makes no reference to Augustine, we think that his basic argument can be related to the thoughts of this key thinker: Given that Kierkegaard (or

¹ For a discussion of Kierkegaard’s essay entitled “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama,” see Chapter II of the present work.

² Kierkegaard (1987), p. 143

³ *ibid.*, p. 144

the pseudonymous writer “A”) sees the Pelagian conception of human being as the archetypal form of the modern, atomistic notion of individuality, it is highly probable that he finds an alternative to this notion in the Augustinian anthropology. In other words, it would not be surprising if Kierkegaard lists Augustine among the representative thinkers refusing to consider human guilt in strictly personal and individual terms. Hence, it would be no surprise if “A” would see in Augustine the possibility to restore the aesthetic conception of guilt by conferring the experience of error an essentially objective dimension.

At the close of our preceding chapter, we pointed at the differences between the ancient tragic poets’ and Augustine’s conceptions of action, and we argued that they differed in how they approached the objectivity of error. Consequently, we do not argue here that Kierkegaard sees the same kind of objectivity in both the Greek tragedies and Augustine’s philosophy. Nevertheless, we think that Kierkegaard’s essay is rewarding for our project since it points out the common ground that relates Augustine to ancient Greek tragedians, without losing sight of their possible points of discrepancy. For this reason, two basic insights that Kierkegaard’s article presents (tacitly or explicitly) will constitute our guiding line in the present chapter:

1. A Pelagian conception of human being fostering an atomistic-individualistic notion of action leads to an ethical notion of guilt and is deeply inimical to a tragic worldview.

2. The objective aspects of the Augustinian experience of error (which we presented in the preceding chapter) may be constitutive of an aesthetic/objective -and in some cases tragic- conception of error.

The main goal of this last chapter will be the examination of the relevance of the Augustinian idea of error -with its “objective” and “subjective” aspects- in considering some post-Augustinian examples of tragic problematization. To this end, we will focus on what is usually accepted to be the second golden age of tragedy, namely on the sixteenth century English and seventeenth century French tragedies. We hope that this kind of research will enable us to locate the post-Renaissance tragedy into the context of what may be called the history of ethical and tragic problematizations, and to comprehend the role of the “Augustinian turn,” which we presented in the preceding chapters.

While considering Greek tragedies, we put emphasis on the objective character of human error and its fundamental non-localizable quality. In the following pages, we will ask whether these characteristics can be found in Elizabethan and Classical French tragedies, and whether the post-Augustinian idea of the objectivity of human fallibility may help us to have a better comprehension of the way human action is problematized in those literary works.

As we have already suggested in Chapter III, the post-Renaissance critics’ reconsideration of Aristotle’s classical theory was deeply marked by a “subject-centered” viewpoint. The seventeenth century criticism in France and in England was marked by a tendency to explain the tragic downfall on the basis of the protagonist’s personal error, which was usually suggested to comport moral aspects. We argued that this viewpoint, together with the resulting “moralizing bias,” led to the formation of a general tendency to give tragedy an essentially moral function.

If tragedy would not live its second golden age, and if the contribution of this period to Western literature were limited to the works of the critics, one would be tempted to establish a more or less direct relation between the absence of tragedy and what we have called the “subject-centered viewpoint.” In such a case, one would probably argue that such a “subject-centered” view was deeply inimical to the spirit of tragedy and that the disappearance of “objective error” had led to the irreversible loss of the possibility to set out a “tragic problematization.” Through an accompanying retrospective turn, one would also be able to argue that the process of “subjectification” of human error, which gained a critical dimension with Augustine, has made any kind of tragic vision obsolete. As a result, we would say, the post-Renaissance mind had no means to have access to any kind of tragic worldview, since it felt comfortable to incorporate the experience of tragedy into an ethical problematization as most critics did.

Obviously, the widespread interest in tragedy during the post-Renaissance period was far from being limited to the works of the critics. In fact, the period in question has witnessed the emergence and popularization of tragedy as a literary and theatrical form. In England and in France, two short but highly influential “tragic periods” have been experienced, with the result that our conceptions of tragedy and tragic problematization have been enriched.

Schematically speaking, this means that the “subject-centered” worldview that dominated the critics’ considerations of tragedy did not lead to a total dominance of a moralistic outlook and a total annihilation of tragic problematizations. This plain fact calls for various questions about the relation between the post-Renaissance mind and Ancient Greece: Does this mean that -as far as the poets are concerned- some sort of a

“tragic spirit,” inherited from ancient Greeks, continued to pervade the minds? Can we say that poets have been successful in establishing an “authentic” contact with the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy, while critics (at least in their reading of Aristotle) could not get rid of their “subjectivist”-moralistic biases? Should we relate the reappearance of tragedy to the genius of a group of exceptional poets who, by staying outside the spirit of their time, succeeded in keeping and reincarnating the ancient tragic spirit and its conception of objective error?

Nothing would be more misleading than to answer these questions in the affirmative. A cursory glance at the plays of Shakespeare, to take the most significant example, would suffice to show how different they are from Greek tragic plays: The absence of the chorus, the novelty of the plots, the differences in structure and characterization, and the recourse to comical elements are all significant components of what we might rightfully call a genuinely Shakespearean tragedy. This distance from the Greek tragic experience becomes all the more comprehensible when one keeps in mind that in Shakespeare’s time there was little interest in Greek tragic poetry and Aristotle’s *Poetics*.⁴ It is true that French tragedy established a more direct contact with the Greek tradition (including Aristotle) and that, as a result, Racine’s universe seems to be closer to that of Greek tragedies: There is occasional use of the chorus; some of the plots are borrowed from Greek tragedy and mythology; there is no mixed use of comic and tragic elements as in the case of Shakespeare... Nevertheless, as we hope to show in the

⁴ While Aeschylus was practically unknown, some plays of Sophocles and Euripides were played among elites. However, those were usually staged as medieval morality-plays. Aristotle’s *Poetics* did not have any significant influence and it is highly probable that Shakespeare did not even read it. The only classical tradition of tragedy available to them was the Latin one and, in fact, Seneca’s tragedies are usually counted among the primary sources of influence for the tragic poets of the period. On these points, see Dillon (2007), pp. 7-12.

following sections, the fact that Racine used some of the Greek material and borrowed some formal characteristics of ancient Greek tragedy does not make him a follower of the Greek tragic spirit. On the contrary, these apparent similarities enable us to see how the same material can be used in the service of considerably different tragic problematizations. In this sense, we think that these similarities illustrate in an even more dramatic fashion the difference between ancient Greek and seventeenth century French ways of understanding and questioning human action.

Hence, what is at stake during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is much more than a simple “renaissance” of the Greek tragedy. The period witnessed the creation of new forms and new tragic problematizations. Hence, the forms of tragic problematization that one comes across after the Renaissance cannot be explained as the products of a process of “return to the past,” but rather as new inventions in questioning human existence and human action. Therefore, it may be stated that there are good reasons to explain these inventions on the basis of the dominant paradigms of the societies that gave rise to them.

Attempting a systematic investigation of all the conditions that grounded these tragic visions goes well beyond our study. As we have already suggested at the beginning of this work, we will limit ourselves to underlining the role of the transformation that the Augustinian moment caused in the ways in which human action is problematized. In this sense, our goal is not to discover and depict the cultural foundations of the tragic vision in the post-Renaissance literature. We will rather point at a more general, common ground on which these (more precisely the Shakespearean and the Racinian) tragic problematizations are built. Here, our emphasis will be on the

differences between the ways in which human action is problematized in these plays and in ancient Greek tragedies.

For this reason, our goal is less ambitious than that of finding reliable textual evidence which proves the existence of an open influence of the Augustinian thought on tragedies. We will rather try to show that, where the post-Renaissance tragic problematizations differ from their ancient Greek counterparts, the consideration of the Augustinian moment is relevant and helpful. In this sense, we will not argue that Shakespeare, Racine or any other poet is “Augustinian” in the strict sense. We will rather try to illustrate that the way they problematize human action belongs to the post-Augustinian era, and that their tragic visions comport some Augustinian elements.

Before we move on to our study of Racine and Shakespeare, we should remind that Augustine was indeed a central thinker for the period in question. We think that there are two factors that legitimate our reference to Augustine while understanding the post-Renaissance era. First of all, although a considerable span of time (more than ten centuries) separate Augustine from post-Renaissance tragedians, the centrality of Augustine’s questions and answers have never lost their paradigmatic status during this long period. The distinguished historian Jaroslav Pelikan seems to confirm the paradigmatic status of Augustine when he describes the final stages of the medieval thought as an “Augustinian synthesis.”⁵ According to him, it would be improper to see the dominance of scholasticism as the defeat of the Augustinians by the Aristotelians,

⁵ Pelikan (1985), pp. 13-22.

but rather as a continuation of the Augustinian project.⁶ The two contributions of Augustine that are central for us -the “invention” of the human *voluntas* and human interiority on the one hand, and the canonization of the idea of original sin on the other- continued to determine the medieval paradigm. Secondly, and more importantly, the Renaissance was marked by an over-growing tendency to return back to Augustine’s philosophy. As is well-known, the Reformation movement, from its very beginning, was deeply marked by Augustinian themes and notions: Luther, himself a member of the Augustinian Order during his early age, was deeply influenced by Augustine’s ideas, especially in his consideration of the original sin and the fallen condition of humanity. In its counter-reformation movement, the Catholic Church too returned to the Augustinian moment and tried to reformulate its position about the original sin on that basis.⁷ Lastly, the Jansenist movement, which would have a direct impact on the Racinean tragedy, was directly influenced by Augustine. For the post-Renaissance mind, therefore, Augustine was far more than a figure belonging to a distant tradition. He was pretty much a “modern thinker”⁸ whose questions and answers were constantly revisited in the debates of the epoch.

In our view, these points constitute a legitimate ground for finding an Augustinian spirit in post-Renaissance tragic problematizations. In the following chapters, we will consider some of Racine’s and Shakespeare’s most important tragedies with a view to underlining the relevance of the Augustinian teaching in making sense of the tragic visions that they represent. In presenting and interpreting the works of these

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ Muller (1999), pp. 705-707.

⁸ The term appears in Marshall (1999), p. 120.

poets, however, we will not follow the chronological order: We will first focus on the Racinian tragedy and then go back to Shakespeare. We think that this choice has a legitimate ground: There have been very little that Racine in particular and French tragedy in general owed to the Elizabethan tragedy. If there are any antecedents to Racine, they are to be found within the French tradition of dramatic literature and among classical poets like Euripides and Seneca. This means that, although English tragedy predates its French counterpart, a chronological consideration of them is not a methodological necessity for us.

We think that this choice is not only legitimate, but also more adequate for the organization of our argument. It is easier to contrast Racine's work with examples of Greek tragedy, since he is a whole-hearted follower of his ancient masters. As we will show, it is also easier to point at the Augustinian basis of the Racinian tragic vision. From these two perspectives, Shakespeare constitutes a much more complex case. For this reason, our presentation will begin with the consideration of the relatively simple case of Racine and then focus on the more complicated example of Shakespeare.

Racine

Tragedy and Morality in Racine

In our second chapter, we analyzed the moralizing tendencies that shaped the way French critics discussed the substance and the goal of tragedy: The Aristotelian *katharsis* was loaded with moral connotations and *hamartia*, considered to be one of the central notions of the *Poetics*, was mostly reduced to a simple moral fault. As far as the problem of tragic effect was concerned, Jean Racine constituted an exception to the general

moralizing tendency: Instead of enlarging the effect of *katharsis* to all kinds of passions, as most French theorists did, he stayed relatively loyal to Aristotle's *Poetics* (as well as its interpretation by Renaissance humanists) and argued that its effect was limited to pity and fear.⁹

Racine's position in the debates on the notion of *hamartia* is more complicated. Although we have already referred to this problem in our second chapter, we think that it is useful to return to Racine's prefaces (most notably to his "Préface de Racine" preceding *Phèdre*) before we move on to the reading of his plays.

Racine's preface to *Phèdre* is probably the text in which the moral dimension of his theatre is articulated in clearest terms. A glance at the closing paragraph is sufficient to see the extent to which Racine's mind was enmeshed in the moralistic language that dominated his period:

What I can assert is that I have not made [a play] where virtue is put in a more favorable light than in this one; the least faults are severely punished; the very thought of a crime is regarded with as much horror as the crime itself; the weaknesses of love are shown as true weaknesses; the passions are displayed only to show all the disorder of which they are the cause; and vice is everywhere depicted in colors which make the deformity recognized and hated.¹⁰

Virtue, vice, fault, punishment, passion and crime: those are the terms that Racine uses to present the essential traits of his play. The lines that follow explicitly show that for him, this essentially moralistic vision does not relate exclusively to *Phèdre* (or Racine's other plays), but generally to tragedy as a form. The Greek tragedy, Racine thinks, "was

⁹ Vinaver (1955), pp. 24-25. This difference of interpretation was of key importance for the conception of the ideal tragic effect. When the theorists enlarged the purgatorial effect of *katharsis* and made it refer to all emotions, they usually ended up attributing a moral function to tragedies. The aim of the tragedy, accordingly, would be to invite the audience to a general state of temperance. When, however, the effect was limited to pity and fear, it was possible to give tragedy a curative function without referring to a moral effect.

¹⁰ Racine (1963), p. 177.

a school in which virtue was taught no less well than in the schools of the philosophers.”¹¹

If we take these formulae as the representative expressions of Racine’s ultimate judgment on the essence of tragedy, there would be no doubt that he followed the spirit of his age and attributed a moral function to tragedies. However, there are serious obstacles behind this kind of conclusion: As various commentators have suggested, there are legitimate reasons for being skeptical about the sincerity of Racine. As Lucien Goldmann argued, these lines were probably written for the Jansenist thinkers grouped around the monastery of Port-Royal, with a view to show them that the famous tragic poet was also a rigorous moralist.¹²

Hence, one should not hastily reduce Racine’s position to an ordinary version of the simplistic moralizing tendency of his age. Besides, when some other parts of the preface (as well as his other similar texts) are taken into consideration, it may be realized that Racine’s position is more complex than the apparent moralistic attitude inherent in the above-cited passage. As the beginning of the preface shows, Racine seems eager to follow the Aristotelian principle according to which a hero must neither be outstanding in virtue, nor marked by any moral defect (*Poetics*, 1453a). In line with this idea, he clearly states that Phèdre is “neither wholly guilty nor wholly innocent” and that “[...] her crime is a divine punishment rather than the product of her own will.”¹³

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² In his argument, Goldmann goes as far as qualifying this last paragraph, together with Thésée’s last verses in the play, as a message directly addressed to Port-Royal. According to him, the ideas in these lines are in open conflict with the substance of Racine’s play. See Goldmann (1959), pp. 416-420. Bremer also points at Racine’s desire to have a good moral reputation in the period when this preface was written. He also refers to a “reconciliation” with Port-Royal. See Bremer (1969), p. 77.

¹³ Racine (1963), p. 175.

What is Racine's position then? What relation does he aim to establish between the experience of error and the tragic effect? In what respects does this position differ from Greek tragedians' attitude? We think that these questions cannot have any satisfactory answer if we limit ourselves to Racine's prefaces. Thus, in order to have a better idea about the Racinian problematization of human action, we will focus on two of his most significant tragedies: *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*.

Localizability of Guilt in Racine

While defining the concept of "objective error," we referred to Max Scheler's formula according to which "guilt is not localizable" in tragedies.¹⁴ Our inquiry into the Racinian problematization of human error will be based on this idea and the question that it invites: May we say that Scheler's motto is applicable to Racine's tragedies? If so, what is the sense in which guilt is not localizable in Racine's *Andromaque* or *Phèdre*? May we attribute any sort of objectivity to Racinian heroes' experience of error? If so, in what way does such objectivity differ from its ancient Greek version?

These questions also call for the reconsideration of Kierkegaard's distinction between aesthetic and ethical guilt: Would it be possible to describe the Racinian experience of guilt with reference to this duality? Is it possible to see these two types of guilt as mutually exclusive?

The consideration of the preface to *Phèdre* made it clear that there is no easy way to answer these questions: Racine himself does not present us a relatively consistent theoretical formulation of his conception of error. He surely seems faithful to the

¹⁴ See p. 40 above.

Aristotelian understanding of the experience of error in ancient tragedy and wishes to prevent his tragedies from being interpreted as moral fables revolving around evil behaviors of protagonists. However, in order to have a better grasp of the nature of the Racinian problematization of action, we need to focus on the play itself.

The story of *Phèdre* (1677), which is usually considered to be Racine's masterpiece, is taken from ancient Greek mythology. As Racine states in the preface, the main sources of inspiration are Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Seneca's *Phaedra*. At the center of this popular story are Hippolytus, the son of the king Theseus from his former wife, and *Phaedra*, the king's second wife and Hippolytus' stepmother. In all three versions, what is central is Phaedra's confession of her illegitimate love for her stepson while her husband Theseus is away on a long trip. The action takes a new turn with the unexpected return of the king: Having declared her illegitimate love to Hippolytus, Phaedra finds herself in a difficult situation and tries to escape it by putting the blame on her beloved.¹⁵ As a consequence, Hippolytus is expelled from the city by his father. When Theseus realizes that he has been deceived, it is too late: Hippolytus is dead and Phaedra, lost in sorrow, kills herself.

To begin with, it might be fruitful to draw attention to some points in which Racine's version differs from Euripides': In Euripides' play, the action is dominated by the tension between two divine powers, namely Artemis and Aphrodite. Phaedra's desire vis-à-vis her stepson is aroused by Aphrodite herself, in order to punish Hippolytus' exaggerated and one-sided sympathy for Artemis, the goddess of virginity. In the very beginning of the play, we see that the young prince goes too far in his loyalty to Artemis,

¹⁵ Note that in Racine's version, it is not Phèdre who plans this intrigue, but her nurse Oenone. Racine says in his preface that he made this modification in order to lessen Phèdre's responsibility in Hippolyte's death. See Racine's preface to *Phèdre* in Racine (1963), p. 175

while he does not give the goddess of love Aphrodite her due respect. In a sense, Phaedra's illegitimate love towards Hippolytus is basically an instrument that Aphrodite uses to punish the young man.

Racine's version mentions the names of these divinities, but the role that it attributes to them is considerably different. The tension between the two goddesses is of much lesser importance and Phèdre's unlawful desire is not part of Aphrodite's plot against Hippolyte. Nevertheless, Aphrodite's name (Racine uses the Latin version "Venus") is mentioned by Phèdre as the source of her love. In the scene where Phèdre reveals to her nurse Oenone her illegitimate love for Hippolyte, she makes explicit reference to the goddess of love and her punishment:

Je reconnus Vénus, et ses feux redoutables,
D'un sang qu'elle poursuit tourments inévitables.
Par des vœux assidus je crus les détourner,
Je lui bâtis un temple, et pris soin de l'orner. (I.4)¹⁶

This punishment, however, is not related to Hippolyte's *hubris* against Aphrodite, but to Phèdre's family origins: She is the daughter of Pasiphaé, who is known to be the daughter of Helios, the goddess of sun. Throughout the play, this origin is emphasized in order to explain the passionate temperament of Phèdre. We learn that the lives of Pasiphaé and of Phèdre's sister Ariadne have been destroyed under Venus' influence. Phèdre sees herself as the new victim of the goddess.

This point is worthy of consideration for us: As we have already said, Racine's preface finds in Phèdre's "destiny" and in "the wrath of gods" some attenuating circumstances for her crime. This may lead one to think that Racine follows his ancient

¹⁶ [...] I knew/ The terrible fires of Venus, the tortures fated /To one whom she pursues. I hoped to avert them / By my assiduous prayers. I built for her / A temple, and took pains to adorn its wall.

Greek masters' way of conceiving and problematizing human error, since he wants to emphasize those *ambiguities* that make the attribution of guilt to particular agents difficult. On this basis, one may argue that Phèdre's guilt has an objective status in the sense that its presence is at least partly independent from the agent who finds herself responsible for it (and who will later be blamed by others on this ground). There is no doubt that this conclusion is appealing to the extent that it fits in very well with our initial insight, according to which the tragic problematization of action has to give error some sort of an objective status. Accordingly, Racine seems to see divine powers as the essential elements of the action and thereby gives the experience of error a complex, quasi-Aeschylarian character.

However, we think that this would be a hasty conclusion: It is true that Racine was willing to be loyal to Aristotle's principles and that his theoretical formulations reflect this desire.¹⁷ However, this should not lead us to think that he developed an objective notion of error by following the spirit of Greek tragedy. Racine does not seem to emphasize here the indeterminateness of Phèdre's guilt (or its "aesthetic," "non-moral"¹⁸ quality), but the fact that she shares the responsibility of her guilt with Venus. The "neither wholly guilty nor wholly innocent" formula that Racine uses in his preface does not point towards the fundamental indeterminateness of the source of error; it rather suggests that the agent is only partially guilty, because she shares responsibility with other (divine) agents.¹⁹ There is, in this sense, no serious ambiguity about the action and

¹⁷ The prefaces to *Andromaque*, *Britannicus* and *Iphigénie* contain such Aristotelian formulations. On this point see Bremer (1969), p. 76.

¹⁸ We use these terms as Kierkegaard uses them in his text that we have already considered.

¹⁹ Note that Racine is not completely consistent in presenting his position. On the one hand, he presents the "neither wholly guilty nor wholly innocent" principle to show how much he is loyal to Aristotle's

the related question of ethical responsibility. There is simply a duality. If that is the case, what is the contribution of divine powers in the Racinian treatment of human action? Do they make an essential part of his tragic problematization?

None of Racine's tragedies takes place in the Christian world and the plots of three of them are borrowed from the pagan world of the Greek tragedy. As expected, those plays contain constant references to Greek deities. *Iphigénie* is exemplary in this sense, since it dramatizes the story of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter upon Artemis' order. However, when one considers his plays together, one encounters serious evidence proving that the divine powers have no central role in them: First of all, when Racine borrows the themes of his plays from Greek tragedy, his model is Euripides, who is usually considered to be the "most psychologically-oriented" of the three masters. In a sense, not only Racine but also his Greek master is remote from the Aeschylean world where it is very difficult to untie the intricate web of human and divine motivations. When one considers *Iphigénie*, this point gains clarity: Both Racine's play and his Euripidean prototype (*Iphigenia in Aulis*) are about Iphigenia's sacrifice, an event which has essential theological dimensions for the tradition that created and transmitted it. But when one takes a closer look at these plays, one sees the extent to which their focus is on the agents themselves. In both plays, divine powers are almost reduced to secondary elements.²⁰ Secondly, even in cases in which gods have central roles in the Euripidean version of the story, Racine chooses to lay emphasis on the agents and their passions. *Phèdre* is representative in this respect, and we will return to it later. Thirdly and most

spirit. On the other hand, he seems to say that Phèdre's position was wholly passive, since the troubles that haunt her are the results of divine punishment.

²⁰ From this perspective, it is interesting to contrast the ways in which Euripides in his play and Aeschylus in *Agamemnon* treated the same material.

importantly, one should not forget the blatant fact that Racine's audience was Christian, and that Greek gods had for them no more than a metaphorical significance. Once we locate ourselves to the standpoint of the non-pagan audience of the seventeenth century, we can safely think that the gods in Racine are nothing more than the "representations" of human emotions. References to divine powers are usually made in contexts in which the emotive status of the protagonist is in question. Even in cases in which one may attribute concrete agency to gods, it would not be wrong to think -following Odette De Mourges- that in Racine there was a "perfect fusion between the will of the gods and the mechanism of human passions."²¹

On this basis, we think it safe to conclude that gods, in the Racinian universe, were not playing a key role in the problematization of human action. The events were not taking place in the "border zone" that Vernant referred to in explicating the main dynamics of Greek tragedy.²² Even in cases in which gods were parts of the plot, Racine's theatre was first and foremost psychological.²³ If we would like to reach a proper understanding of the Racinian questioning of action, we should not expect to find the solution in Racine's reference to divine punishment in his preface to *Phèdre*: The fact that Phèdre is punished by Venus does not constitute a major factor in the complexity of the ethical quality of her guilt.

Provided that this is the case, one might consider it a good idea to undermine Racine's formula that sees Phèdre as "neither wholly guilty, nor wholly innocent," and regard the heroine as "absolutely guilty," to use Kierkegaard's terms. We think that

²¹ De Mourges (1967), p. 116.

²² See p. 50 of the present thesis.

²³ In identifying Racine's theatre, Odette de Mourges uses the term "psychological drama." See Mourges (1967), pp. 30-33.

doing this would be an excessive step. Even if the major dynamics that sustain it are different from those that we find in Greek tragedy, we think that the Aristotelian “neither-nor” formula constitutes one of the key points to understand Racine’s tragic vision. In this sense, although we are inclined to neglect the role of divine powers in Racine’s theatre, we still think that our initial question (“Is guilt localizable in Racine?”) can be replied on the basis of this “neither-nor” formula. Therefore, we will take Racine’s statement (“Phèdre is neither wholly guilty, nor wholly innocent”) as a working hypothesis and suppose that Phèdre is partly innocent.

Let us proceed with the following simple-minded question: If Phèdre is partly innocent for her crime, and if gods do not play any essential role in the ethical problematization of the action, who is the other agent that we will consider to be partly responsible? The simple-minded answer to this would be the following: Nobody. Phèdre seems to be the only responsible person for her illegitimate love towards her stepson. Hence, the argument would go, Scheler’s motto does not work for *Phèdre*, since the guilt in question can very well be *localized*. The error is comprehensible in exclusively “subjective” terms and has no apparent objectivity. The work itself does not provide any real theological-ethical basis for the “neither wholly guilty nor wholly innocent” formula in the preface. Obviously, such a conclusion would have serious implications from Kierkegaard’s perspective: It would mean that *Phèdre* treats human error in exclusively moral terms and that, as a result, is not tragic. The recourse to the Aristotelian theory does not save Racine from being trapped to the spirit of his age: His tragedies do not contain any tragic problematization.

We think that this extremely debatable -not to say completely erroneous- result is the product of a narrow comprehension of the “objectivity of error” and the “localizability of guilt.” In fact, the argumentation preceding this conclusion is problematic since it comprehends objectivity and localizability on the basis of the conception of agency that ancient Greek tragedy presents and problematizes. However, in order to have a better grasp of the main dynamics of Racine’s theatre, we should ask whether objectivity and localizability can be understood differently. Provided that Racine’s theatre belongs to an age in which the Greek conception of agency has been left behind, we should ask whether the notion of objectivity can still have a substantial function in understanding the tragic problematization in *Phèdre* and in other plays by the same dramatist.

Our answer will be positive. We think that the tragic problematization of Racine is based on an objective conception of error and that this objectivity has a different signification. In Racine, we are no longer in a universe in which human agent is conceived as an *open field* where the forces in and out of the person are articulated into each other and create complex causal chains. The causality of the Racinian action is unilateral in the sense that all action can be traced back into its identifiable human source. Phèdre’s unlawful desire can be directly attributed to her and the fact that she refers to her family origins does not change this: Her origin is not an external factor, but a constitutive part of *her* agency. The objectivity of her actions, therefore, will not be explained with reference to the contribution of non-human powers to her acts.

Racine and Objectivity: The Rule of Passions

How shall we explain the Racinian objectivity then? We think that Racine's prefaces - including the one about *Phèdre*- give us an important clue for making sense of the objectivity of the Racinian notion of error: passion. In more than one occasion, Racine explicitly states that the tragic effect is intrinsically related to the element of passion that his plots contain. His preface to *Bérénice* constitutes a clear example of this: In defending the simplicity of his play, he argues that a good tragedy should be capable of attracting the audience's attention by "simple action, upheld by the violence of the passions, the beauty of the sentiments, and the elegance of the expression."²⁴ As Eugene Vinaver suggests, passions constitute one of the true "necessities" of his plays.²⁵

In order to come to terms with the role of passions in Racine's theatre, a glance at one of Racine's earlier tragedies can be helpful. *Andromaque*, written in 1667, was the first important achievement of Racine and anticipated the general characteristics of the dramatist's future work. The most significant point we should consider is that the action in the play can be schematized as a chain of passions: Oreste is in love with Hermione, Hermione is in love with Pyrrhus, Pyrrhus is in love with Andromaque and Andromaque, because of her fidelity vis-à-vis her dead husband Hector, refuses Pyrrhus. The play has its roots in this initial chain of passions and narrates how it heads towards a tragic situation after Oreste comes to Epire (a part of the defeated Troy) for a mission. Practically all important events in the play are the outcomes of the changes in the

²⁴ Preface to *Bérénice* in Racine (1963), p. 123.

²⁵ Vinaver (1955), p. 21

internal attitudes of the protagonists:²⁶ Hermione, who does not respond to Oreste's feelings because of her love for Pyrrhus, changes her attitude and accepts her lover's proposal. Andromaque, who has constantly refused Pyrrhus' proposal, decides to marry him in order to save his child. Hermione, when she learns that Pyrrhus will marry Andromaque, urges Oreste to kill Pyrrhus. The disastrous ending (in which Oreste kills Pyrrhus; Hermione's unbearable regret and fury drives her to suicide and Oreste loses his mind) can be seen as the climax of a series of events intrinsically related to the protagonists' emotive states.

Where is the error? Who is guilty? Eugene Vinaver attributes the main "tragic error" of the play to Hermione, more exactly to the scene when she last sees Pyrrhus (IV.5) and, following this, begs Oreste to kill him.²⁷ This makes sense, since Hermione's demand leads the play towards the final calamities and it is the outcome of an excessive desire. When Hermione learns that her order has been fulfilled, her furious words against Oreste express this: She tells him that she is a "maddened lover" and that in her rage, her "heart denied [her] lips" (V.3). However, this last speech is less an announcement of regret than an explosion of fury against Oreste :

Qui t'amène en des lieux où l'on fuit ta présence ?
Voilà de ton amour le détestable fruit :
Tu m'apportais, cruel, le malheur qui te suit. (V.3)²⁸

²⁶ The following passage from Vinaver (1955) seems to back up this view: "For certain of his plays [Racine] contrived a mechanism of which the sole spring was the spiritual life of the characters. In *Andromaque* the action advances at the will of events of a psychological order by simple changes of attitude. [...] In [*Britannicus* and *Mithridate*] the action appears from beginning to end as the logical development of a state of mind or of a series of states of mind, a development which excludes any suggestion of extraneous events." See Vinaver (1955), pp. 3-4. De Mourgues shares this idea and says: "It is well known that in Racine's theatre action does not depend on external events but on the feelings of the characters" (De Mourgues (1967), p. 31).

²⁷ Vinaver (1955), pp. 102-109

²⁸ Who brought you to this place / To which I fled your presence? / This is the fruit / Of your detested love. You brought me, cruel man, / The ill which follows you.

This means that Oreste is no less guilty, firstly because he has listened to the words of a “maddened lover,” and secondly because he came to Epire with the hope of conquering Hermione’s heart. Oreste’s passion, in this sense, is an equally important factor in the preparation of the catastrophic end. His words following Hermione’s speech seem to affirm this:

Je suis, si je l’en crois, un traître, un assassin.
Est-ce Pyrrhus qui meurt ? et suis-je Oreste enfin ?
Quoi ? [...]
J’assassine à regret un roi que je révère [...]
Je deviens parricide, assassin, sacrilège. (V.4)²⁹

If we also have in mind the official reason why Oreste has been sent to Epire, we realize that Pyrrhus may also be held responsible for this atrocious ending: He is the one who infuriated his superiors by not killing Andromaque’s son Astyanax (who is also the son of the Trojan hero Hector). The reason why he spared the life of a potential future enemy of the Greeks was his passionate love towards Andromaque.

From such a perspective, it would be more proper to expand the tragic error into the play as a whole, rather than locating it into a particular moment. All the three main protagonists (Hermione, Oreste, Pyrrhus) may be characterized by the excessive character of their passions. But while presenting these passionate states, Racine seems eager to follow the Aristotelian midway: His characters are “neither entirely good, nor entirely wicked.”³⁰ There is no doubt that for Racine -and for his audience- passion is dangerous and may lead to the ruin of ethical values. But, even when it finds its source in human beings, passion may be *experienced* as an active force whose existence goes

²⁹ If I’m to believe her, / I am a traitor and a murderer. / Did Pyrrhus die? And am I still Orestes? / O gods! [...] I slay / A king whom I revere [...]; / I become murderer and sacrilegious.

³⁰ “First Preface” to *Andromaque* in Racine (1963), p. 2.

beyond particular agents. This is the reason why Racine's passionate characters are usually well aware of the force of their passion and, having done all they could against it, they finally surrender. When Oreste first comes to Epire in order to find Hermione, his words to his friend Pylades reflect this awareness and hopelessness:

Puisque après tant d'efforts ma résistance est vaine
Je me livre en aveugle au destin qui m'entraîne.
J'aime. (I.1)³¹

For Oreste, his love for Hermione is his destiny. Here, we are faced with a typically Racinian situation where passion gains an almost "objective" existence, in the sense that it is experienced as a concrete force that acts upon the agent. It leads one towards a situation in which there are only two ways out: Either the fulfillment of the desire in question, or death. Oreste's words continue as follows:

Je viens chercher Hermione en ces lieux,
Le fléchir, l'enlever, ou mourir à ses yeux.³²

Phèdre constitutes an even better example for the agent who experiences passion as an objective force. Obviously, she presents a more difficult case for the poet who is willing to follow the Aristotelian midway between goodness and wickedness. Unlike Oreste, who still has the chance to exchange his dangerous love with the complacency of the marriage, Phèdre is in a dead-end: Her passion can have no positive value whatsoever. And since she is not in an "either/or" situation like Oreste's, she is entrapped by the idea of death:

J'ai conçu pour mon crime une juste terreur ;
J'ai pris la vie en haine, et ma flamme en horreur.

³¹ "Since, after all my efforts, it is vain / Further to struggle, blindly I submit /To the passion that possesses me. I love."

³² "I come to seek Hermione in this place /And either make her yield, and come with me, /Or die before her eyes."

Je voulais en mourant prendre soin de ma gloire,
Et dérober au jour une flamme si noire. (I.3)³³

From such a perspective, what is objective in Phèdre's situation is not a particular error, but the very experience of passion. If we reconsider her case in the general context of the Racinian dramaturgy, the influence of her family origins and Venus gains a new meaning. They are important only insofar as they are the concretizations of Phèdre's experience of passion as an objective force. They do not share in (and thereby diminish) Phèdre's responsibility. They merely embody her passion.

We think that we can even make a fruitful comparison between the status of passions in Racine's plays and that of *atê* in Greek tragedies. Obviously, the Racinian passion differs from *atê* in that it is a psychic force that finds its source in the acting agent. However, the way it operates and determines the agents' fields of action gives it a parallel function: It is what seizes human beings from inside and leads them to momentary loss of consciousness. When Hermione, because of her passion, becomes a "maddened lover" and urges Oreste to murder Pyrrhus, she seems to act under the influence of *atê*. In *Phèdre*, the much repeated word "*fureur*" seems to underline this relation between the experience of passion and the momentary, *atê*-like madness. In various occasions, the way Phèdre experiences her love can be best comprehended with reference to this "*fureur*." When Oenone asks her whether she is in love with somebody, her answer is: "*De l'amour j'ai toutes les fureurs.*"³⁴ In the scene where she announces her love to Hippolyte, the term "*fureur*" is used to qualify the specific nature of her desire:

³³ "I have a just abhorrence of my crime; /I hate my life, abominate my lust; /Longing by death to rescue my good name /And hide my black love from the light of day."

³⁴ "All of love's frenzies I endure."

Hé bien ! Connais donc Phèdre et *toute sa fureur*.
J'aime. Ne pense pas qu'au moment que je t'aime,
Innocente à mes yeux je m'approuve moi-même,
Ni que du fol amour qui trouble ma raison
Ma lâche complaisance ait nourri le poison. (II.5)³⁵

Love, destiny and “*fureur...*” The intrinsic relation between those terms makes them the cornerstones of the Racinian experience of passion. The new, Racinian version of objectivity and localizability can be best understood with reference to them: In one sense, the guilt is localizable in *Phèdre*, since the heroine is ready to accept her guiltiness and to judge herself in strictly moral terms. But the way in which passion and the guilt that it causes are *experienced* brings about a new dimension: Guilt is not localizable in the agent, since it is the outcome of a force that operates almost like an alien power, although it finds its source in the agent.

While explaining the conception of action in Greek tragedy, Jean-Pierre Vernant refers to the co-existence of both human and divine levels in the same tragic action.³⁶ In a similar way, it is possible to conceive the Racinian action in two levels: On the one hand, there is the “subjective” level in which the error and the guilt are localized in the agent and become part of an ethical problematization. On the other hand, there is the “objective” level, the level of passion, in which guilt is considered an objective aspect of the human experience. The “neither wholly guilty, nor wholly innocent” formula gains its true sense through this twofold conception of action: At one level, the agent is guilty; at the other, he/she is subjected to objective powers. Hence in Phèdre’s case, what makes her partly innocent is not Venus’ alleged contribution to the action, but the dual

³⁵ “Know Phaëdra, then, and all her madness. Yes, /I love; but do not think that I condone it, / Or think it innocent; nor that I ever /With base complaisance added to the poison /Of my mad passion.”

³⁶ Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (2001), pp. 39-40

character of the experience of passion. In this sense, it is wrong to say that Phèdre is *partially* guilty and *partially* innocent: She is *both* guilty and innocent.³⁷

A succinct expression of the twofold nature of the Racinian problematization of action can be found in the poet's words, indirectly communicated by one of his contemporaries. Abbé de la Porte says:

I have heard Mme. de la Lafayette relate, said the Abbé Saint-Pierre, that in a conversation Racine maintained that *a good poet could get the greatest crimes excused and even inspire compassion for the criminals.*³⁸

The reason why the audience can excuse greatest crimes is not that they are less great than they seem to be at first glance. The actual reason is that every experience of guilt is accompanied by a parallel experience of innocence. The poet's mastery, for Racine, is in the subtlety of the exposition of an *innocent* person's *experience of guilt*. This, we argue, Racine does by presenting guilt -or rather the error underlying it- as an objective phenomenon.

We think that this experience of passion as an objective power haunting the agent has a structural parallelism with the Augustinian experience of sin. As in the case of Augustine's notion of sin, the Racinian passion is both "personal" and "transpersonal": On the one hand, it is located within the agent, so that we can refer without any hesitation to *Phèdre's own passion* and *Phèdre's own guilt*. On the other hand, this experience has a transpersonal character in that it can rule over the agents and that its dominion may almost be independent from the individual characteristics of its victims.

³⁷ In his *Le Dieu caché*, Lucien Goldmann argues that there are many cases in Racine in which the "neither-nor" formula does not hold. *Phèdre* is one of these significant cases, since the main protagonist is "both wholly guilty and wholly innocent at the same time." See Goldmann (1959), pp. 353-354. (my translation)

³⁸ Cited in Vinaver (1955), p. 103. My emphasis.

In Racine, passion is presented as an element that is “already there,” in the sense that its existence is not explained and legitimized with sole reference to the psychological and ethical conditions of the agent.

Hence, through its presentation of the experience of passion, the Racinian problematization goes beyond the limits of the ethical and gains a tragic dimension. In this sense, Racinian agent is not “left to himself, in a Pelagian manner,” to use Kierkegaard’s words. In a pretty much Augustinian fashion, Racine’s heroes are subjected to a condition that goes beyond their personal characteristics. Their lives are shaped by a fundamental fragility that makes them powerless in the face of their own intrinsic powers. In this sense, we think, Phèdre, Oreste or Hermione belong to a tragic problematization which we may define as post-Augustinian.

Shakespeare

Shakespeare and the Tragic Error

As the preceding section illustrates, there seems to be no serious theoretical difficulty in studying the Racinian problematization of human action by comparing it with Greek tragedy. In Shakespeare’s case, it is harder to follow such a strategy and to make a straightforward comparison between Elizabethan and Greek tragedies. The difficulty has a simple, historical reason: Shakespeare did not directly inherit the treasures of Greek tragedy, since those plays were rarely read and played in his time. In fact, Seneca’s Latin tragedy was by far the most influential classical inspiration for the Elizabethan dramatists. Moreover, in contradistinction to the later example of Racine’s France, Aristotle’s *Poetics* was neither widely read, nor considered to be a canonical text

on tragedy. In England, Aristotle's theory of tragedy would not gain popularity before the golden age of tragedy ended. For this reason, it is highly probable that Shakespeare did not even read *Poetics*. Hence, we cannot start our account of Shakespeare by focusing on the way he appropriated Aristotle's principles and by comparing his notion of tragic error with that of Greek tragedy on this basis. As Alexander Pope would later suggest, "to judge [...] of Shakespeare by Aristotle's rules is like trying a man by the Laws of one Country who acted under those of another."³⁹

The renaissance conception of tragedy in England has been more or less loyal to the medieval definition of tragic poetry, which emphasized the element of fortune in tragic downfalls. As Lilly Campbell argued, one of the chief aims of the tragic poet in the Renaissance was to show that human prosperity is unpredictable and that even the monarchs can be victim to the vacillations of fortune. This, however, does not mean that the experience of error was a peripheral and negligible element in Renaissance tragedies. In Elizabethan tradition, Campbell says, this downfall was not explained with simple reference to the operations of blind fate, but also with reference to the personal errors of the heroes.⁴⁰ Hence, although the Aristotelian notion of *hamartia* did not constitute a major source of inspiration for them, the Renaissance -and therefore Shakespearean- problematization of action revolved around the experience of error.

What kind of error? Some interpreters, still following the traces of the Aristotelian principles in Shakespeare's work, argued that in Shakespeare, "Aristotle's tragic error becomes a moral error -that is, an act of sin" and that "the Aristotelian

³⁹ Dillon (2007), p. 10

⁴⁰ Campbell (1986), p. 15

dictum that character reveals itself in choice gains a new urgency.”⁴¹ Now, there is no doubt that Shakespeare makes frequent use of moral vocabulary in his plays and that, in the majority of cases, the errors of the protagonists can be defined in moral terms, e.g. with reference to the heroes’ sinful passions, excessive desires or pride.⁴² From a historical standpoint, this moral dimension can be seen as an integral part of tragic poetry: The Renaissance audience was not as insistent as we are in differentiating the tragic poet from the teller of moral tales. Indeed, it seems impossible to neglect the moral function attributed to tragedy since medieval times and throughout the Renaissance. As Campbell says, the “poet was a ‘popular philosopher’ [...] in thought of the Renaissance from the sixteenth century through the eighteenth.”⁴³

Does this mean that characters and their choices are critical for the tragic problematization in Shakespeare’s plays? Before we attempt to find an answer to this question in the plays themselves, it is worth noting that Shakespeare criticism until the twentieth century has generally given a positive answer to this question: The “subject-centered” outlook has been accepted as a norm. For a long time, the interpretations of Shakespeare’s plays were characterized by a powerful tendency to focus on the psychological processes and moral qualities of the protagonists. In some significant cases, such as the seventeenth century critic Thomas Rymer, this led to an utterly moralistic outlook. In his notorious critique of *Othello*, Rymer tried to formulate the

⁴¹ Virgil K. Whitaker, *The Mirror up to Nature*, p. 52, quoted in Muir (1979), p. 16

⁴² G. R. Elliott is among the Shakespeare scholars who argued that Shakespeare’s tragedy -and Renaissance tragedy as a whole- is the tragedy of pride. See Muir (1979), p. 15. Lilly B. Campbell, who was one of the significant Shakespeare scholars of the first half of the twentieth century, dedicated a whole book to the Shakespearean notion of passion. Her basic goal is to show the extent to which the Shakespearean problematization of action follows the general spirit of the moral philosophy of his age. See Campbell (1986). For a relatively recent interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays on the basis of the passions of the characters, see Kirsh (1990).

⁴³ Campbell (1986), p. 42.

moral lesson to be taken from the play and, in a significant manner, blamed Shakespeare for violating the rules of poetic justice.⁴⁴ Even in cases in which Rymer's and his successors' moralistic attitudes have been harshly criticized, some sort of a "subject-centered" outlook prevailed: The emphasis was still on the personal qualities of the protagonists and the downfall was explained with reference to personal defects. This was the famous theory of "tragic flaw," which found its most elaborate articulation in the extremely influential work of A. C. Bradley, dated 1904.⁴⁵ For Bradley, what was central for the tragic downfall was a "fatal imperfection or error,"⁴⁶ and this was intrinsically related to the character of the hero:

What we feel strongly, as a tragedy advances to its close, is that the calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deed of men, and that the main source of these deeds is character. The dictum that, with Shakespeare, "character is destiny" is no doubt an exaggeration, and one that may mislead [...]; but it is the exaggeration of a vital truth.⁴⁷

Bradley's "subject-centered" interpretation -which still constitutes an important reference-point for today's critics- seems to underline the extent to which the Shakespearean problematization of action differs from that of Greek tragedies: As in the case of Racine, the Shakespearean action apparently takes place in a universe where superhuman powers do not play any significant role in the formation of a protagonist's field of action. We are faced with agents having their own reasons, values and strategies that occasionally lead them into tragic situations. Hence, the Bradleyan outlook seems to suggest that the Shakespearean problematization of action takes place in a universe

⁴⁴ Rymer (1956), p. 162.

⁴⁵ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1951.

⁴⁶ Bradley (1951), p. 22.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 13

where guilt is *localizable*. Accordingly, the experience of error can be understood in mainly “subjective” terms, i.e. with exclusive reference to the conditions of the agent.

In the following pages, we will elaborate on the validity of this “subject-centered” approach while interpreting Shakespeare’s tragedies. We will first focus on what makes Shakespeare’s plays open to this kind of Bradleyan, “subject-centered” reading and what kind of a notion of error it presupposes. Our second step will be to question this approach with a view to discover different dimensions of the Shakespearean problematization of human error. Throughout this inquiry, we hope to show those aspects of the Shakespearean tragedy which reflect the objective dimensions of error and guilt.

Macbeth, Othello and Objectivity

Among Shakespeare’s tragedies that represent superhuman powers, *Macbeth* is usually considered as the play in which those powers play the most important role. For this reason, it can give the reader the opportunity to test the limits of a “subject-centered” interpretation and to explore further dimensions in the Shakespearean problematization of human action. A first encounter with the play leads one to observe some similarities with the world of Greek tragedy. For one thing, as in the case of the typical example of *Oedipus Rex*, the theme of the inevitability of fate seems to occupy a central position in *Macbeth*. The play opens with the three witches, the “Weird sisters” who (in Act I Scene 3) initiate the chain of events by informing Macbeth and his friend Banquo about their future: They salute the main protagonist as the future thane of Cawdor and the future king. Soon after the witches leave the stage, Macbeth is told that he has been appointed

as the thane of Cawdor, and he is thereby convinced that the words of the witches are not sheer lies but real prophecies. On this basis, Macbeth immediately reaches the conclusion that the second part of the prophecy will be fulfilled and that, sooner or later, he will replace the present king. The rest of the play shows us how the second part of the prophecy is fulfilled and how Macbeth, together with his wife, contributes to this process. Hence, the appearance of the witches, comparable in its dramatic function to the visit of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, is the first key event that triggers the main action. In this sense, the superhuman element is present from the very beginning of the play and considerably shapes the action.

A closer analysis of the play makes it clear that the function of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* is different from that of the superhuman powers in Greek tragedies like *Agamemnon* or *Oedipus Rex*. We think that A. C. Bradley is right in arguing that the Weird Sisters have no outstanding divine quality: They are not *daimon*-like powers that directly determine Macbeth's field of action. They are simply soothsayers and their impact on the two main protagonists (i.e. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth) is limited to this function. As far as their first scene with Macbeth is concerned, they do not have the power to decide on Macbeth's future, but only to make him face with his fate. In this sense, their influence upon Macbeth is indirect, since it comes from the power of their words and not from their ability to directly shape the hero's field of action. Their superhuman forces act on other human beings through all-too-human mechanisms: They merely talk and let their listener interpret their words in particular ways.

For this reason, the role and significance of the Weird Sisters are highly dependent on their interlocutors, i.e. those who listen to them and act thereafter. In this

sense, the difference between Macbeth's and Banquo's reactions to their words is significant: Macbeth is bewildered by the idea of taking the place of the king, while Banquo seems much more prudent and invites his friend to moderation. In a sense, what is central for the scene is less the truth of the words that the Weird Sisters tell than the particular sort of reaction that Macbeth gives to this truth. Even though the Weird Sisters start the chain of events by their superhuman powers, what is determining for the rest of the plot is the way Macbeth reacts to them.⁴⁸

When we consider the play in its entirety, the function fulfilled by the witches becomes even clearer: After the scene in which the Weird Sisters unveil the truth about Macbeth, the emphasis is on the way the hero and the heroine act on this basis.

Throughout the play, the focus is on Lady Macbeth's imperturbable urge to reach the crown, Macbeth's hesitant steps towards his goal and the atrocities that follow. The play, in this sense, is not about the supremacy of fate: It is rather about the consequences of a specific sort of reaction that specific human beings (i.e. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth) give when they are faced with a vital truth about their fate. The focus, throughout the play, is not on the way the prophecy of the witches becomes real, but on how Macbeth - as well as Lady Macbeth- experience and contribute to the process of realization of the prophecy.

From such a perspective, the play seems to call for a "subject-centered" interpretation, in which the emphasis is primarily on how the two protagonists deal with the situation. This kind of reading may easily lead one to explain the main tragic errors

⁴⁸ In his preface to his French translation of *Macbeth*, Yves Bonnefoy makes the following illuminating comment on this issue: "With Shakespeare -and despite the remains of Paganism that he finds in Scotland- we are in the Christian world of the free choice of the will, where Satan has a considerable power, but within precise limits." See the preface entitled "L'Inquiétude de Shakespeare" in Bonnefoy (1998), p. 10 (my translation).

of the protagonists with reference to a moral terminology: What leads Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to their downfall is their “guilty ambition, seconded by diabolic malice and issuing in murder.”⁴⁹ The play, from such a perspective, is about passion, more precisely about fear and ambition.⁵⁰ Hence, the study of passions and of the way they have been problematized in the Renaissance may be highly relevant for grasping the main dynamics of the play. Accordingly, Arthur Kirsch thinks, the consideration of Augustine’s contribution to the Renaissance debates on passion may be rewarding:⁵¹ Ambition, which is for Kirsch central to the action in the play, can be seen as a form of pride. For this reason, the Shakespearean problematization of ambition in *Macbeth* may be illuminated by reference to Augustine’s theory of original sin in the *De civitate Dei*. Kirsch thinks that Macbeth’s ambition comports certain crucial elements that may also be found in Adam’s initial sin of pride. In both cases, the same “perverse desire of height,” to use Augustine’s terms, is at issue.⁵²

There is no doubt that passion -and especially ambition- is one of the leading themes of the play. But does this mean that the central error in the play can be discussed with exclusive use of moral vocabulary? In other words, does the centrality of passions in *Macbeth* confirm the above-suggested belief that Shakespeare replaced Aristotle’s tragic error with moral error? We think that even a “subject-centered” standpoint (such as the one Bradley adopts) may answer these questions in the negative: Macbeths’ experience of ambition, despite its moral connotations, goes well beyond the limits of a

⁴⁹ Bradley (1951), p. 34

⁵⁰ Campbell (1986), p. 208 and p. 238.

⁵¹ Kirsch (1984)

⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 269-270. The passages that Kirsh refers to are from *De civitate Dei*, 14, 13-15. Note that we have also referred to some of these passages in our discussion on pride and original sin.

strictly moral problematization. Although Macbeths' outrageous craving for power can be seen as a form of sin -at this point we agree with Arthur Kirsch- the general context in which it is presented gives it a different character. We think that in *Macbeth*, the experience of error gains an objective quality that cannot be comprehended through a "subject-centered" standpoint having recourse to a moral vocabulary.

Wilson Knight, who presented one of the first articulate criticisms of this "subject-centered" standpoint, referred to the "atmospheric quality" of Shakespeare's plays.⁵³ We think that the term is highly rewarding for understanding what, in Shakespeare, gives the experience of error an objective status. According to Knight, one of the mistakes that Shakespeare's interpreters fall into is to focus too much on the time-sequence of the events which constitute the story. However, Knight thinks, Shakespeare's tragedies are "set spatially as well as temporally in the mind," in the sense that there are "throughout the play a set of correspondences which relate to each other" independently from the flow of events.⁵⁴ This set of correspondences is what constitutes the general "atmosphere" of the play. What is important from our standpoint is that the consideration of this atmospheric quality has a direct impact on the way Shakespearean action is to be conceived. According to Knight, "personification" -which is the prominent element that "subject-centered" readings take into account- should lose its priority. "Personification," "atmospheric suggestion" and the "direct poetic-symbolism" should have equal weight in the interpretative process.⁵⁵ In such a reading, any reference to the protagonists' "characters" should be refused, since this term inevitably invites

⁵³ See Knight (1959), especially the first chapter entitled "On the Principles of Shakespeare Interpretation," pp. 1-16.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 11

improper ethical considerations that make the comprehension of the play problematic.⁵⁶

The term “character” leads the reader to approach Macbeth, Othello or Iago as real human beings whose existence can be comprehended independently from the main dynamics of the play of which they take part. However, according to Knight, the actions and qualities of these protagonists cannot be understood without regarding them as parts of the atmosphere surrounding them.

There is no doubt that in *Macbeth* we find one of the best examples of this atmospheric suggestiveness. Even A. C. Bradley, whose reading is usually considered to be a typical example of character-based interpretation,⁵⁷ underlines the “unusual strength” of the “special tone or atmosphere” of *Macbeth*.⁵⁸ The darkness that dominates the action (almost all of the scenes in *Macbeth* take place at night), the colors that glimmer in the prevailing obscurity (especially the red of blood), or images like “earth shaking in fever,” “the mind full of scorpions” contribute largely to the events that take place in the play.

One may think that this atmospheric quality, despite its centrality for the correct comprehension of the overall significance of the play, makes very little contribution to the problematization of human action. We think that such a view is misleading,

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 9-10. According to Knight, focusing on the characters directly leads to a moralistic outlook: “It is impossible to use the term [character] without any tinge of a morality which blurs vision. The term, which in ordinary speech often denotes the degree of moral control exercised by the individual over his instinctive passions, is altogether unsuited to those persons of poetic drama whose life consists largely of passion unveiled.”

⁵⁷ L. C. Knights, in his classical article entitled “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” harshly criticizes Bradley’s work, which is, for him, “the most illustrious example” of character-based interpretation. See Knights (1970), p. 47

⁵⁸ Bradley (1951), p. 333. Note that Wilson Knight, in the “Prefatory Note” to the new edition of his work, cherishes Bradley’s emphasis on the atmosphere: “Nor was I at all concerned to repudiate the work of A. C. Bradley. Though Bradley certainly on occasion pushed ‘character’ analysis to an unnecessary extreme, yet he it was who first subjected the atmospheric, what I have called the ‘spatial’, qualities of the Shakespearean play to a considered, if rudimentary, comment.” See Knight (1949), p. v

primarily because it tends to reduce atmospheric elements to mere ornaments accompanying and supporting the action. However, the role of the atmosphere in *Macbeth* can hardly be reduced to a proper background effect that sustains the main plot. The atmosphere is, so to speak, *infused* in the action: It is what determines the quality of the action by endowing it with an almost “metaphysical” dimension.

Here arises the objective aspect of the Shakespearean problematization of action: Macbeth’s murders are not presented simply as some acts of guilt belonging to a particular agent, but also a series of *events* that have direct repercussions on the cosmic level. The words that Lennox says soon after Macbeth’s murder of the king -but before he learns the event- are representative in this respect:

The night has been unruly. Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down, and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i’th’air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events,
New hatched to the woeful time. The obscure bird
Clamored the livelong night. Some say the earth
Was feverous and did shake. (II.3)

Here, as elsewhere in the play, darkness and other atmospheric elements are more than simple poetic devices that Shakespeare uses to intensify the dramatic effect: They are essential components of the main action. By use of those elements, Macbeth’s “error” goes beyond the moral dimensions of guilt and reaches a metaphysical dimension.⁵⁹ For Knight, “the murder of [the king] and its results are essentially things of confusion and disorder [...]”⁶⁰ Consequently, the evil in Macbeth’s acts is not reducible to a bunch of personal reasons and motives. It is the prolongation of the darkness that dominates the

⁵⁹ This is the reason why the chapter that Wilson Knight devotes to *Macbeth* is entitled “*Macbeth* and the Metaphysic of Evil.”

⁶⁰ Knight (1949), p. 150.

play: “The evil of atmospheric effect thus interpenetrates the evil of individual persons.”⁶¹

When viewed from this perspective, the play is not only about ambition but also about evil as an objective, “metaphysical” force. Accordingly, Macbeth is not only the active ambitious ruler, but *also* the passive sufferer of evil. In his experience of ambition, evil acts more or less as an active, independent power that enslaves him. This gradual enslavement can be observed in the words that Macbeth tells right after he learns that he is the thane of Cawdor and starts to think that he can also be the king. Once they gain the status of prophecy, the words of the Weird Sisters become concrete powers that trigger Macbeth’s transformation:

Why do I yield to that suggestion,
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And makes my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought whose murder yet is but fantastical
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother’d in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not. (I.3)

The “supernatural soliciting” that begins with the prophecies of the witches has some uncontrollable effects on Macbeth that are “against the use of nature.” This is the moment when evil becomes a concrete force unleashing a vertiginous series of events that will lead Macbeth towards devastation. For Knight, “this is the moment of the birth of evil in *Macbeth*.”⁶² Macbeth’s “character” might very well be prone to ambition, but the tragedy begins when the ambitious man “puts on the harness of necessity” as Aeschylus’ Agamemnon does and experiences evil as a real, objective force. Fear, which

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 153.

is usually conceived as the “passion” dominating the play, arises as a consequence of this particular experience of evil. What, in Act III, leads Macbeth to commit new murders is this fear. And in experiencing this fear, he seems to be more or less aware of his enslavement to it. At the end of III.2 -right after he orders the murder of Banquo- he expresses this awareness: “Things bad begun,” he says to Lady Macbeth, “make strong themselves by ill.” Once the rule of evil begins, there is no escape from it.

From such a standpoint, Macbeth’s fear constitutes an indispensable aspect of the tragic problematization. This fear is not only a psychological element having serious ethical consequences, but also a fundamental mode in which Macbeth relates himself to the world. Yves Bonnefoy defines it as a “metaphysical” fear that leads the hero towards a sort of radical alienation and an existential detachment from the world.⁶³ This fear reveals to Macbeth that “the earth and the sky are alien to him,” and the accompanying jealousy turns other beings into enemies.⁶⁴ This essential state of isolation and separation from the whole also implies a turn towards the self, a turn that reminds us of Adam’s *pride* preceding his act of transgressing the divine command.⁶⁵ Hence, what is terrifying in *Macbeth* is not the morally evil character of the two protagonists, but the potential they carry to become such evil persons. From an ethical standpoint, this or that evil act in the play may easily be related to -or located in- a particular agent. However, the tragedy shows us more than that: It shows us that behind this ethical guilt lies an almost

⁶³ Bonnefoy (1998), p. 11

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 12

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 13. Note that Bonnefoy does not make any direct reference to Adam’s pride. But he describes Macbeth’s turn towards himself as the “vague but extremely profound and dangerous badness, from which the daemon has profited” (my translation).

objective potentiality to be detached from the world, to act out of pride, to be dominated by fear and to become a murderer.

At this point, it is possible to realize a structural parallelism between Macbeth's enslavement to his fear and Phèdre's enslavement to her illegitimate passion. We can approach both plays from an ethical standpoint and locate the guilt without considerable difficulty: Macbeth and Phèdre are unmistakably guilty. In this sense, the tragic error *is* a moral error in those plays. This, however, does not mean that tragic error is *replaced* by a moral error: In both plays, the experience of moral error contains certain aspects that resist any ethical consideration. Both protagonists are in sin, but their situation cannot be understood with exclusive focus on the "subject as evildoer." Evil itself should also be considered as an active force that determines the flow of events.

Macbeth constitutes a good starting-point for understanding how, in Shakespeare, actions that have ethical relevance are integrated into a tragic problematization. As we have explained above, this integration owes much to the density of the poetic atmosphere that dominates the play. But what happens in a tragedy like *Othello*, where the atmospheric element is relatively less suggestive, at least at first glance?

It is obvious that *Othello*, compared to the other great achievements of Shakespearean tragedy such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear* or *Macbeth*, is a more "worldly" play. The action takes place in a more or less realistic, historical setting; the superhuman powers have no role whatsoever; and there is no central reference to uncontrollable natural forces as in the case of *King Lear*. As a result, the "imaginative atmosphere"

appears to be relatively limited when compared to Shakespeare's other great tragedies.⁶⁶ Wilson Knight thinks more or less in the same lines and argues that it is difficult to understand *Othello* on the basis of one dominant atmospheric suggestion as in the case of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. The interpretative process should work through the "meaning of separate persons" having their own concrete existence in the play.⁶⁷

This may lead one to think that *Othello* forces the reader to make a "subject-centered" reading focusing on the transformation that the main character undergoes. As in the case of *Macbeth*, this choice has a legitimate basis: It is possible -and to a great extent rewarding- to read the play with particular focus on the psychology of Othello. There is no doubt that one of the greatest achievements of Shakespeare in *Othello* is the subtlety of his depiction of human passions and of the psychological processes that sustain and shape them. The play shows us with great mastery how passionate love - even when it is legitimized by the bond of marriage- can become utterly destructive. In this sense, *Othello* is a story on the fragility of passionate love in particular and the vulnerability of human psychology in general.

As expected, this kind of a "subject-centered" outlook puts emphasis on the precise errors or character-flaws that lead the main protagonist to his tragic downfall. Accordingly, there has been a dominant tendency in Shakespearean criticism to label the work as a play about jealousy.⁶⁸ From such a standpoint, *Othello* has been considered either as essentially jealous or as easily malleable to such dangerous passions. A. C.

⁶⁶ A. C. Bradley refers to "the comparative confinement of the imaginative atmosphere" in *Othello*. He sees this factor as the main reason why *Othello* is usually seen as slightly inferior to other great Shakespeare tragedies. See Bradley (1951), p. 185

⁶⁷ Knight (1949), pp. 104-105

⁶⁸ Campbell (1986), p. 148

Bradley criticized the view that Othello was jealous by temperament,⁶⁹ but he still preferred to concentrate on what pushes the protagonist towards an excessive passion that may be transformed into destructive jealousy. According to him, the character of Othello is marked by simplicity of mind, with the result that “emotion excites his imagination, but it confuses and dulls his intellect.”⁷⁰ For this reason, the argument goes, Othello does not permit his reason to interfere with his emotions and to lead him towards a Hamlet-like hesitation. When he loves, his love is absolute. When he trusts, his trust is absolute.⁷¹ As a consequence, “if such a passion as jealousy seizes him, it will swell into a well-nigh incontrollable flood.”⁷²

There is no doubt that this kind of outlook captures an essential aspect of the play. But if we limit the significance of the play to the way it depicts human passions, we run the risk of overlooking a central element in it: Iago. Wilson Knight thinks that the Iago-theme in the play constitutes the preponderant atmospheric element that gives a symbolic unity to the otherwise diversified world of *Othello*. Othello and Desdemona are concrete human beings that can be understood through their all-too-human traits and motivations. Psychology can constitute a prominent way to discover their lines of action. But this is not the case with Iago. It is futile to look for an intelligible set of human motives behind his ruthless intrigues aiming to destroy Othello. In his case, “motive-hunting” is a hopeless project.⁷³ The only way to make sense of Iago’s line of action is

⁶⁹ Bradley (1951), p. 186

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 189

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 191

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ The term “motive-hunting” was first used by the nineteenth century critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge, as many others who would follow him, argued that Iago’s soliloquies during the entire play

to consider him as a “kind of devil,” a “Mephistopheles” whose plot against Othello is “causeless, self begotten.”⁷⁴

Iago, considered as a devilish intriguer, seems to represent the metaphysical dimension of evil in the play. The Iago-theme, in this sense, is what brings *Othello* closer to *Macbeth*, rather than to a classical domestic tragedy. From such a perspective, the play is not simply about particular sorts of passions to be analyzed from a psychological standpoint. It is about evil and its power over human beings. Iago can be seen as the evil that has its own, independent presence, trying to triumph over the noble existence of Othello and of his beloved wife. Hence, what is prominently tragic about Othello is not a particular flaw of character that we find in him, but the fragility he exhibits in the face of Iago’s devilish tricks. *Othello*, approached from this angle, depicts the confrontation of a concrete human being with the ruses of evil.

We have already suggested that evil in *Macbeth* owes its objective status in part to its omnipresent, “atmospheric” existence. In *Othello*, this objective presence is not observed in the general atmosphere pervading the play, but in the satanic aspects of Iago’s acts and attitudes. In this sense, the impact of Iago’s presence in the play goes beyond that of an ordinary individual character and constitutes the central theme of the work. Through him, the imagery of evil permeates the poetic universe of the play. The speeches of nearly all central characters of *Othello* -with the notable exception of Desdemona- are filled with images pertaining to evil.⁷⁵

present us no satisfying reason for his intrigues against Othello. On this point, see Muir (1979), pp. 105-116.

⁷⁴ Knight (1949), pp. 114-115

⁷⁵ On the use of diabolic images in *Othello*, see Bethell (1952), especially pp. 66-69.

From our standpoint, one particular instantiation of the imagery of evil in the play is of extreme importance: Emilia, while defending Desdemona's innocence, refers to the Biblical image of serpent (Genesis 3:14) without knowing that the image she uses directly relates to Iago. She thinks that whoever misguided Othello and convinced him about Desdemona's guilt should be punished like the serpent in heaven:

If any wretch have put this in your head,
Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse! (IV. 2)

If we take this image as a central, representative poetic constituent in the play, then Iago may be thought to stand for (to use Paul Ricœur's terms) the evil which is "already there" before the fall. Such an interpretation becomes all the more adequate when one acknowledges the continuities between the English Renaissance tragedy -especially *Othello*- and the medieval tradition of morality plays. From such a standpoint, Iago may be said to fulfill the role played by the character of Devil or Vice in morality plays.⁷⁶

If Iago is the serpent, Othello stands for Adam in Paradise. Evidently, this does not mean that Othello's moral and psychological condition is similar to that of Adam preceding the fall. This rather means that there is a structural parallelism between the Adam-serpent relation and Othello-Iago relation. If Iago is the Devil, Othello is the "Mankind" of morality plays, i.e. the stereotypical human being whose essential imperfection makes him open to temptation and liable to corruption. This being said, one should prevent seeing *Othello* as a morality play and explaining the main tension in the tragedy in terms of a quasi-Manichean duality. The play is not simply about the battle between the evil and the flimsy human goodness. It is about the way in which a concrete

⁷⁶ Leech (1959), p. 186.

human being -too complicated for being reduced to an incarnation of human goodness-faces evil.

As in the case of *Macbeth*, therefore, the tragedy of Othello tells us much more than the objective existence of evil and its rule over goodness. In *Macbeth*, evil as an objective entity has a tragic dimension because it is not only an exclusively external power that determines the protagonist's fate but also a power that is infused in the internal, psychological life of the hero. The "birth of evil" in *Macbeth* is the moment when the objective evil becomes a part of the "subjective," psychological experience of the main protagonist. We think that *Othello* presents us a similar kind of transformation: The "evil outside," which plays its tricks over the fragile soul of Othello, meets the "evil inside," the potential evil that is an essential aspect of the imperfect nature of human existence. The third scene of Act III, which is usually known as the "temptation scene," is of key importance in this respect: This is the scene where the evil Iago infiltrates into Othello's mind through his subtle words and places there the seeds of jealousy. And once Othello is "tempted" by Iago, jealousy becomes a personal force that begins to rule the protagonist from inside. The idea that Desdemona cheated on him gains an almost independent power over Othello. It begins to take over him deep inside and threatens his much-admired existence:

I had been happy, if the general camp,
Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known. O, now, for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content! (III. 3)

For Othello, there is only one way to eradicate this unbearable feeling of unrest: To prove that she is guilty. It is impossible for him to stay in a state of indecision marked by

the suspension of judgment. This is the reason why his demand for concrete proof is continuously reiterated during the scene:

Make me to see't; or, at the least, so prove it,
That the probation bear no hinge nor loop
To hang a doubt on; or woe upon thy life! (III. 3)

Once his thoughts head towards this direction, they gain momentum and know no barrier. After that time, there is no possibility for Othello to change his ideas. Moreover, he is aware of the irreversibility of his internal state, like Phèdre who is aware of the inevitability of her passion:

Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up. (III.3)

Just like Macbeth who becomes a slave to his desire to protect his crown, Othello becomes a slave to his jealousy. In both cases, it is possible to make use of a moral terminology that puts stress on the flaws of the protagonists. In this sense, we think that a “subject-centered” outlook can make significant contribution to the comprehension of both plays. Neither Macbeth nor Othello are mere poetic devices that embody universal values and experiences: They are concrete human beings whose fields of action are largely shaped by their personal characteristics, if not by their individual “characters.” However, in both cases, the way in which passions are experienced gains a tragic dimension that overrides and silences any kind of “subject-centered” outlook and its moralistic versions. In *Macbeth*, ambition and fear become non-personal, objective forces that concretize the functioning of a superhuman evil. In *Othello*, Othello’s

jealousy is triggered by an almost impersonal evil force and, once it begins to inhabit the hero's heart, it ceases to be a merely "subjective" feeling. We think that one may very well read the play as a work on jealousy, not because it presents us an essentially jealous person, but because it exposes jealousy as an almost independent power shaping a concrete human being's field of action, or as the prolongation of a non-personal, external force.

Conclusion: Augustine and the post-Renaissance Tragedy

In his article entitled "No More Masterpieces," Antonin Artaud makes the following instructive observation on Shakespeare:

If, in Shakespeare, a man is sometimes preoccupied with what transcends him, it is always in order to determine the ultimate consequences of this preoccupation within him, i.e., psychology.⁷⁷

We think that this thought -which has a definitely negative connotation in the context that Artaud articulates it- captures the two aspects of the Shakespearean tragedy that we presented in the preceding pages: On the one hand, it acknowledges the fact that Shakespeare's plays present us the confrontation of human beings with powers surpassing them -powers that we qualified as objective. On the other hand, it makes it clear that the center of the Shakespearean tragedy is not the confrontation itself, understood as an objective event, but the consequences of this event on human psychology. In *Macbeth*, what is at the center of the action is less the confrontation of Macbeth with his fate than *the way* he and his wife experience this confrontation. In *Othello*, the significance of the play can by no means be reduced to a battle between the

⁷⁷ Artaud (1958), p. 77.

objective evil and the fragile human life. The play is mainly about the transformation that a particular human being's psychology undergoes in its confrontation with the tricks of evil.

We think that these two aspects of Shakespeare's plays can be illuminated by relating them to two main themes of the Augustinian thought. In our third and fourth chapters, we presented Augustine's thought as a complex project characterized by two initially distinct but ultimately synthesized themes: On the one hand, we have analyzed Augustine's philosophical reaction to the Manicheans -which resulted in the elaboration of what we have called "subjective" elements, such as the free choice of the will. On the other hand, we have shown how Augustine, in his anti-Pelagian doctrines, introduced various "objective" elements into his philosophy, especially into his conception of sin and sinfulness. The co-existence of these two themes (which is not unproblematic in some respects) resulted in a complex anthropology and psychology. And we have argued that this complexity becomes increasingly discernible when one considers the experience of sin in Augustine. Augustine as anti-Manichean follows and develops the anti-tragic attitude of Greek philosophers by explaining sin on an exclusively individual basis and with reference to an internal power of choice. Augustine as anti-Pelagian, on the other hand, introduces a transpersonal dimension into the experience of sin by relating it to a common historical event and a universal psychological condition resulting from that.

We think that the consideration of these two aspects of the Augustinian thought is relevant and rewarding for having a better grasp of the rebirth of tragedy in the Renaissance. We think that the "subject-centered" outlook of the critics, together with its

more or less “moralistic” versions, owe very much to the Augustinian moment.

Augustine’s project has introduced a number of major “subjective” aspects into the assessment of human action in general and human error in particular. Hence, we think that Augustine’s contribution to the history of ethics and moral psychology has some undeniable role in the way Western mentality conceived tragedy.

When we turn to the plays themselves, Augustine’s role becomes much more complex. We think that Augustine’s thought, in its anti-Manichean and anti-Pelagian ways of treating human sin, contains in germ the two basic dimensions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’ tragedies: On the one hand, it does not permit any ambiguity concerning the relation between the agent and the act, in such a way that ethical responsibility ceases to be an enigma (as it was in Aeschylean tragedy) and guilt becomes localizable in particular agents. On the other hand, it introduces a transpersonal aspect into *the way* this localizable guilt is experienced, by relating it to an objective condition of fallibility. We hope to have shown that these two aspects of the experience of error and guilt can be found in the plays of Shakespeare and Racine. In both writers, the experience of guilt may be comprehended in two distinct but ultimately overlapping levels. On one level, guilt is personal and may be explained through a “subject-centered” outlook, with particular reference to the psychological state of the protagonist: Phèdre and Macbeth are both guilty for their passionate behavior; Hermione’s excessive love is what lies behind the tragic ending of *Andromaque*; Othello has the flaw of being too radical in his love and the resulting jealousy. On another level, human error and the resulting guilt are the objective constituents of the protagonists’ condition of existence: Passionate love can rule over the one who experiences it; fear and ambition can act like

independent powers dominating the person; jealousy can by itself conquer the field of action of the lover. The human psyche contains certain powers that can override the allegedly “free” person who seems to take responsibility for his/her acts. Man’s existence is continuously haunted by dangerous inner potentials which can be triggered in particular conditions and which can thereby initiate the tragic mechanism.

Here, the objectivity does not relate to this or that particular error, but rather to the essential condition underlying those errors. Neither Macbeth, nor Hermione are like Aeschylus’ Agamemnon: Their particular errors belong to *them*. There is no external *atê* that derails them, no *miasma* that functions through them and no *daimon* that acts upon them. Outside them is the world with its potential natural dangers, wars and enemies. Their errors are not the direct consequences of these external elements, but of the particular ways in which their “world inside” is intertwined with this “world outside:” Macbeth interprets the words of the Weird Sisters in a peculiar way and reacts to them in a perilous manner. Othello does not cease to count on Iago’s words and extracts from them the worst conclusion ever possible. Hermione, Phèdre or Oreste do not (because they cannot) change the directions of the desires that they have for their impossible objects. In all these cases, the external elements are the triggering factors behind the errors. The real source of the error, and what gives it its tragic dimension, is the propensity in each agent to fail in the face of these external perils. The source of the error is, before everything else, the “fallibility” that does not cease to haunt human existence. All tragic characters that we have focused on are instances of the post-Adamic condition marked by an essential fragility. In this sense, Shakespeare’s and Racine’s tragedies belong to the post-Augustinian era.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF OBJECTIVE ERROR

The notion of “objective error,” borrowed from Suzanne Saïd and developed with reference to Kierkegaard’s views on tragedy, has been one of the central terms of the present thesis. In the initial phases of our study, this concept played a key role in the theoretical treatment of the experience of error in Greek tragedies. But as we proceeded, we related the term and its various aspects to different philosophical and literary enterprises, and we treated it as a basic, paradigmatic element of our position. Hence, the idea of objectivity, in its relation with the experience of error, has become a distinctive element of what we named as “tragic problematizations” of action. Accordingly, a tragic problematization is characterized by an effort to introduce a transpersonal dimension into the experience of error. In other words, a tragic problematization presents a situation in which the overall signification of the action cannot be comprehended solely on the basis of an intelligible, ethically accountable agent. There is always “something more,” an element that makes it difficult to have an ultimate judgment concerning the ethical conditions of the agent in question. On this basis, we have argued that the idea of objectivity introduces one of the central characteristics of tragic problematizations which distinguish them from their ethical counterparts.

However, it would be of great theoretical use to clarify and elaborate the term with a view to make it a rewarding tool in approaching the problem of human error in general. Treating a given error as an objective event and comprehending it in terms of the objective conditions that prepare it may enable us to face the highly complex aspects

of human action. Such a paradigmatic shift would probably allow us to cope with various complex cases in which the relation between the agent and the act is problematic, if not considerably obscured by numerous factors. As a consequence, “objective error” may shed light on one of the central notions of ethics: responsibility. It may enable us to go beyond a limited conception of responsibility strictly related to the notions of free choice and will. Hence it may become the keystone of a complex moral psychology which can make us face various facets of the question of responsibility.

Our goal in these concluding pages will not be limited to the reformulation of our initial problematic and of the solutions that we have presented. We also want to gain further insight into the philosophical problem of error by showing the extent to which objectivity is a useful -and in some cases necessary- notion. This does not mean that we will attempt to present a highly developed, exhaustive definition of the concept of objective error. Our much more limited goal will be to point at some cases in which one may expect some benefit from the use of the idea of objective error.

The twentieth century has witnessed a series of catastrophic events in which human evil gained a systematic, mechanistic and “inhuman” character; and the Nazi genocide of the Jews during the World War II is probably the most typical example of those events. While facing the atrocity of this operation, what has been traumatic for humanity was not only the enormity of the number of victims, but also the ingenuity of the Nazi bureaucracy in establishing a complex machinery for pursuing its “rational” end. Nazis’ extermination camps represent a new, malevolent possibility for the functioning of human evil in an impersonal scale. As a consequence, this horrible

experience led to the reappraisal of the existing values and norms, and a reconsideration of the phenomenon of human evil.

In order to reformulate the problem of objectivity of error, we will focus on one of the most “successful” executors of this horrifying operation: the commander of the concentration camp Treblinka, Franz Stangl. The recordings of the interviews made by the American journalist Gitta Sereny in 1971 give us valuable clues for understanding the place of Franz Stangl in this machinery and the way he evaluates his own position. Michel Terestchenko’s insightful reflections on these recordings¹ will constitute the main source of inspiration for our discussion on objective error in the following pages.

For Terestchenko, what is remarkable and to a great extent shocking in Stangl’s case (and in other similar examples) is the imbalance between the immensity of the crime in question and the qualities of the agent who is held responsible for it. These crimes have been committed mostly by ordinary human beings who were, to use Terestchenko’s terms, simple “functionaries of evil.”² In a sense, they were the representative examples of the phenomenon that Hannah Arendt called the “banality of evil.” Most of them were far from having dangerous sadistic inclinations for committing genocide. In fact, during their trials following the war, a significant number of them defended themselves by suggesting that they were only applying orders and that they did not have any initiative about the overall functioning of the system.³

¹ See Terestchenko (2007), Chapter III entitled “Franz Stangl, Commandant du camp Treblinka, ou l’engrenage de la degradation,” pp. 69-97.

² Terestchenko (2007), p. 73.

³ As Seyla Benhabib suggests, the term “banality of evil” does not refer to the intrinsic qualities of actions or principles underlying them, but rather to the “specific quality of mind and character of the doer himself” (Benhabib (2000), p. 74). The following excerpt from Arendt’s book that Benhabib refers to is illuminating in this respect: “Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain’ [...] He merely, to put the

However, Terestchenko thinks that the case of Stangl cannot be properly understood if the emphasis is put on his natural inclination to follow orders. In a sense, Stangl's case is slightly different from that of other well-known "functionaries of evil" like Rudolf Höss and Eichmann. For these latter officers, the orders of their superiors had already reached the status of ultimate authority, to the extent that they could not even envisage criticizing them.⁴ Stangl's case was more complicated. Even before he was commissioned to the commandship of the Treblinka concentration camp, he had a clear awareness of the atrocities that were going on. In his prior missions, which also had insupportable aspects, Stangl thought of preventing the situation by being commissioned to other positions. At these points, a key feeling prevented Stangl from taking a radical step: fear. According to his account, he was aware of the possibility of being sent to a concentration camp if he resisted the orders. He believes that even his family could have been put into trouble by such an act of disloyalty. Hence, in every phase of Stangl's career, we come across a man who is more or less aware of the situation and of the necessity to avoid it, but who cannot take the required risk. For this reason, Terestchenko describes Stangl as a man "entrapped by the circumstances and by his cowardice."⁵

Needless to say, Terestchenko does not use the term "entrapment" in order to diminish Stangl's degree of responsibility. This entrapment, as Terestchenko says, is not a mere external factor that suddenly shapes Stangl's life and determines his field of

matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing. [...] It was sheer thoughtlessness -something by no means identical with stupidity- that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period" (Arendt (1965), pp. 287-288).

⁴ Terestchenko (2007), p. 92.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 86. All translations from Terestchenko's book are mine.

action. It comes in degrees, throughout a long process during which -according to the journalist Sereny and Terestchenko- Stangl *could have* avoided it by taking certain risks. Moreover, it is obvious that at the basis of this process of entrapment lies Stangl's "voluntary" commitment to the Nazi agenda: Although he looked for the ways to escape the situations which he found himself in, he never considered challenging his original adherence to the Nazi movement. In this sense, even if Stangl's way of dealing with this "inhuman" situation may be found more "human" in comparison to other similar cases, there are serious reasons for blaming him for his participation in this operation. There is no doubt that he was in a situation from which he could have escaped. In this very basic sense, Stangl was culpable.

What is remarkable, however, is Stangl's reluctance to accept his culpability with a remarkable clarity of conscience. Despite Gitta Sereny's efforts to convince him about his culpability, Stangl's general attitude consists in resisting this idea by suggesting that he did his best to escape. In a sense, the absolute power of the Nazi machinery is seen by Stangl as the main factor that pushed him to pursue his hideous mission. For this reason, he is convinced that he did not have any other chance and that, in this sense, he was *destined* to contribute to these crimes.

We can imagine for a moment that Stangl really succeeded to convince Gitta Sereny or the court that he really had no possibility to avoid the situation. Would that make him innocent? Let us assume that his fear -instead of his voluntary decisions- had been the major factor behind his disability to prevent his getting involved in this situation. Should we think, then, that his crime was not really the murder of 900,000 persons, but his cowardice? Although these conclusions seem to be unacceptable, they

deserve to be taken seriously. In effect, these are mainly the conclusions that Stangl reached upon reflection on his case. Terestchenko's analyses make it clear that these conclusions are not the products of mere demagoguery; they are based on a particular account of action and responsibility that Stangl formulates in clear terms:

At the police college, they taught us [...] that the definition of a crime should consist of four elements: There should be a subject, an object, an action and an intention. In case one of these elements is lacking, we cannot define that crime as punishable. If the "subject" was the government, the "object" the Jews, the "action" the gassing, then the fourth element, the "free will" was lacking.⁶

What is striking about this account of action is the emphasis put on the element of "free will" in determining an agent's responsibility: Stangl considers himself innocent on the grounds that he had no free will while doing the act. However problematic this conclusion might be, the reasoning behind it represents a popular -and to some extent crude- version of what we have called the "subject-centered" outlook based on the idea of free will. For Stangl, the juridical-ethical relevance of his acts depends on his status as "subject." And he argues that, since the subject of the act in question was the government, he could not be taken responsible.

Even though it cannot be treated as an elaborate, fully articulated theoretical position, Stangl's unsophisticated "subject-centered" view deserves philosophical attention. In a sense, it exemplifies the absurd conclusions that such a paradigm, centered on the ideas of will and free choice, may lead one. Kierkegaard has told us that with the ethical guilt of moderns, the agent began to be "accountable for everything."⁷ Stangl's case shows us the other side of the coin: When the criteria for being a "subject

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

⁷ Kierkegaard (1987), p. 144.

of action” are defined in strict terms, one may easily find a way to be “accountable for nothing.”

On the other hand, Gitta Sereny’s interview comprises two key moments in which Franz Stangl seems to leave this “subject-centered” paradigm and sees his responsibility under a different light. During one of the interviews in which he depicts the initial phases of his career, Stangl suddenly makes the following confession: “I should have killed myself in 1938. [...] It all began in that year. I have to accept my culpability.” Culpability for what? For the death of 900,000 people? This is not clearly implied by what he says here. In fact, Terestchenko interprets this as a confession of his cowardice, and not of his crimes.⁸ Nevertheless, we witness here one of the rare moments in which Stangl’s clear conscience seems to be obscured by an indistinct feeling of guilt.

Stangl’s second “paradigm-shift” happens towards the end of the series of interviews and constitutes a more interesting example. During their last conversation, Stangl makes the following speech divided by long silences:

I have never done anything bad to anybody with my own intention. [...] But *I was there*. [...] Yes, in reality *I share the responsibility*. Because my culpability... My culpability... Only now, during all these conversations... Now I have talked for the first time.⁹

Gitta Sereny suggests that this is the only moment (probably since their early conversations) when Franz Stangl pronounced the term “culpability.” At the end of their conversations -and of his life-¹⁰ Stangl faced his guilt and accepted the truth.¹¹ What was

⁸ Terestchenko (2007), p. 75.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 90 (my emphasis).

¹⁰ As Sereny reports, Stangl finishes the conversation after a couple of sentences and dies nineteen hours later from a heart attack.

the nature of this paradigm-shift that shed a new light on Stangl's condition and forced him to face the truth? We think that the idea of "objectivity of error," which we have developed throughout the present thesis, captures the essence of this last confession. Stangl seems to realize in the last moment that the condition of his free will is not the central element that helps us to establish his culpability. The "objective" conditions that surround him do not remove his responsibility. There are cases in which even the sheer fact of "being there" makes the person accountable for the crimes in question. Crime and culpability are not mere "subjective" experiences but "objective" events. Stangl's last words, especially his painful "I was there," reflect his awareness concerning this objectivity. Terestchenko interprets this last confession in more or less the same fashion:

Stangl had finally reached this state of moral lucidity [...]: the awareness that the responsibility of a man does not depend exclusively on the *intentions of his will*, but on the *objective reality of the acts* that he has committed, whatever be the constraints, threats and other hostile forces that might have acted upon him.¹²

We think that this last confession is where Stangl goes beyond his simple-minded form of "ethical problematization" grounded on the possibility to directly attribute acts to "free" agents. Through his admittance of "being there," Stangl goes beyond this unsophisticated framework. But this is not simply a shift from an elementary form of ethical problematization to a complex one. What happens is a somewhat radical "epistemological rupture" that momentarily enables Stangl to face his condition under a new light. This new light is not the product of an elaborate discussion about the various aspects of his case, but that of a sudden gestalt-switch: With his "I was there," Stangl finds himself as a part of a "tragic problematization" forcing him to see his past as a

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 90-91

¹² *ibid.*, p. 91 (my emphasis).

series of *events* rather than a series of “free” choices that have been occasionally restrained. This does not mean that Stangl himself is one of those tragic heroes whose experiences can be compared to those of Agamemnon, Oedipus or Phèdre. As Sereny’s questions and Terestchenko’s interpretations make it clear, it is hardly possible to picture Stangl as a man who is entrapped by the blind force of fate and who struggles against it until the last moment. It is obvious that, throughout his long process of degradation, Stangl had various moments in which he could have escaped the situation by risking his life. Moreover, as we have already suggested, it is possible to find an element of “voluntariness” in Stangl’s attitude towards the Nazi agenda, at least in his initial commitment to it. Nevertheless, we think that it would make sense to describe Stangl’s last change of perspective as a passage from a narrow form of ethical problematization to a tragic problematization. Even if *we* cannot consider his “errors” as “tragic,” what enables *him* to see them under a new light is the adoption of a “tragic” standpoint.

One of the primary goals of the present thesis has been to understand the history of tragic problematizations under the light of the parallel history of ethical problematizations. However, as we suggested in the introductory chapter of our work, our intention has not been to underline the incompatibility of these two spheres. In fact, such an enterprise would have no other result than to prove the futility of any theoretical attempt to deal with the question of the tragic. For this reason (and in line with our initial intention to follow the basic attitude of “the philosophy of tragedy”), we have rather tried to understand one sort of problematization on the basis of the other: While reading tragedies, we focused on those aspects that may be directly relevant for an ethical

problematization. While interpreting elaborate ethical theories, we tried to underline those elements that seem to introduce (or call for) a tragic problematization.

This does not mean that our philosophical goal was limited to indicating the possible points of convergence that exist between these two sorts of problematization. Here, we would like to subscribe to a more powerful claim that has inevitable normative undertones: We think that an ethical problematization of responsibility *should* take into account the questions and attitudes that a tragic problematization brings about. In this sense, tragic responsibility should not be considered as a primitive form of responsibility that belongs to the allegedly “poor” conceptual framework of, say, ancient Greek tragedies.

There is no doubt that Stangl’s “theory” of responsibility does not constitute an elaborate example of ethical problematization: As we have already suggested, it is too simple-minded and crude to be considered as a philosophical discussion of responsibility. Nevertheless, it is a vivid exemplification of how an ethical problematization can fall victim to its own concepts and presuppositions, and lead one to absurd conclusions. The weakness of Stangl’s “theory” does not result from the vagueness of its concepts and reasoning, but from the very strictness of those elements. This strictness is partly due to the fact that Stangl refuses to realize that our reflection on responsibility may introduce us into hazy zones where our acts happen to have inevitable tragic connotations. For him, a consistent account of responsibility -based on notions such as intention, free will and subject- should not admit the existence of borderline cases where the “error” is best understood as an “objective” event and where the agent

may be “tragically responsible.” He thinks that responsibility should be a matter of either/or, where human being is *either or* guilty or innocent.

While discussing the notion of responsibility, Jean-Louis Chrétien makes the following observation:

Is it merely contingent that the term “responsibility” [...] did not appear until the age of Enlightenment, that is to say, the age of the triumph of the individualism and of the adoration of humanity by itself?¹³

Chrétien seems to suggest that the notion of responsibility gains centrality when the individual “subject,” isolable from the surrounding “objective” elements, begins to be treated as the only ethically relevant source of action. Moreover, Chrétien sees a “properly Pelagian pride” in the modern ideal of “auto-responsibility” based on the agent’s claim to completely account for the consequences of his/her actions. For him, such an ideal may lead one to a Sartrean attitude where responsibility would gain its veritable sense only when it is “omni-responsibility,” a responsibility for “everything and everyone.”¹⁴ Chrétien thinks that such a conception of responsibility, according to which human beings are (to return to Kierkegaard’s terms) “accountable for everything,” is the result of an “egocentric” conception.¹⁵ In his essay, Chrétien also refers to the extremely problematic cases of “collective responsibility” where, this time, individual responsibility may easily be discarded due to the impersonal character of a crime.¹⁶ We think that Stangl pursues a similar strategy and resorts to the impersonal character of the

¹³ Chretien (2007), p. 201 (my translation)

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 188-193

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 193.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 193-196. Note that Chétien uses the term “tragic” while he presents that complexities related to collective responsibility: “Collective action, in its modes, possibilities and laws, cannot be reduced to a sum of individual acts. Therein lies its tragic aspect.” (*ibid.*, p. 194, my translation)

crimes in question in order to spare himself from any sort of personal responsibility. In this sense, Chrétien's criticism points towards the common root of the ideas of "accountability for everything" (as in the case of Sartre) and "accountability for nothing" (Stangl). Chrétien thinks that the same Pelagian pride haunts both of these extreme positions.

We think that Chrétien's argument may enable us to underline the relevance of Augustine for having a good grasp of the history of ethical and tragic problematizations. As we hope to have shown in the fourth and fifth chapters of the present thesis, Augustine's intellectual project presents us with an extremely complex ethical problematization that is open to some fundamental "tragic" elements. In his efforts to override the Manichean conception of evil, Augustine lays the ground for a properly ethical problematization that elaborates the anti-tragic attitude inherited from the ancient philosophical tradition. His later struggle against the Pelagians, however, is shaped by an effort to go beyond his initial position by introducing a "tragic" sense of fallibility¹⁷ into the ethical problematization of action. As we have already said,¹⁸ this does not mean that "Augustine the moralist" left the scene to "Augustine the tragedian," and that the ethical problematization has been overshadowed by its tragic counterpart. This means that Augustine's ethical enterprise became extremely (and rewardingly) complex and had the potentiality to face those aspects of human life that may also be integrated into a tragic problematization. This is one of the reasons why Augustine did not only inspire the whole medieval tradition, but also "tragic" thinkers like Pascal or Kierkegaard. This is

¹⁷ To repeat, we think that this tragic ground of fallibility concerns primarily the way sin is experienced in worldly life.

¹⁸ See Chapter I and V.

also the reason why we think that the Shakespearean or Racinian tragedies are “post-Augustinian,” despite the fact that Augustine’s thought in its entirety is not tragic.

In his book on *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*,¹⁹ Charles T. Mathewes considers what he calls “subjectivism” to be the basic modern attitude that prevents a true grasp of (and an efficient struggle against) evil. For him, one crucial constituent of this attitude is “the belief that humans act in ways that rely for their determination, wholly and finally, on the *free and spontaneous choice of the human will*.”²⁰ We think that Franz Stangl’s case provides a good -and somewhat shocking- example for the possible consequences of such a subjectivist attitude.

While Mathewes’ starting-point is the catastrophic experience of evil that the twentieth century has gone through, ours is a less shocking but equally intriguing observation about the Renaissance and post-Renaissance “subject-centered” conception of tragedy. For us, the most critical aspect of this conception lies in its inability to deal with ancient Greek tragedians’ conception of objectivity of error. In some considerable cases, this inability led to a poor conception of action that attempts to grasp a tragic problematization on the basis of an ethical one.²¹ In this sense, we find a parallelism (however remote it is) between the ways in which Renaissance critics misinterpreted tragedy and Stangl misinterpreted the nature of his responsibility. Both problems result from the same “subjectivist” attitude.

¹⁹ *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 2004

²⁰ Mathewes (2004), p. 6 (my emphasis).

²¹ See Chapter III of the present study.

As we have suggested above, a thorough criticism of such a “subjectivist” standpoint goes hand in hand with an attempt to broaden and enrich our ethical problematizations by communicating them with some aspects of their tragic counterparts. Objectivity of error, which we have presented as a fundamental element of the Greek tragic problematization of action, may play a key role in such an enterprise. For this reason, we think that a developed philosophical discussion of the idea of objective error should be one of the main points of focus of today’s ethics. Here, by proposing a partial philosophical account of the history of “objective” and “subjective” notions of error, we attempted to prepare the ground for this sort of a philosophical discussion. In this sense, this thesis may be conceived as the first phase of a more general philosophical enterprise that aims to deal with the problem of human error with regard to its objective, “tragic” aspects.

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