

Colloquium Adamantianum I

Text 1

The Philosophical Significance of the Church Father Origen

*On the Christian Critique of the One-sidedness of the Greek Philosophy of Essence*¹

(Introduction and Part II)

[94] More than any other thinker, Origen has always been present in all centuries of intellectual history. He and his work have never been forgotten, as is clear not only from the so-called Origenist controversies of the 4th and 6th centuries, from the various renaissances of his thought in the 12th century, from the mysticism of the 13th century, from the Renaissance and from Humanism, but also from his reception by great present-day theologians.

If an author's reception history is an indicator of his significance, Origen must be deemed one of the greatest thinkers of all intellectual history. Hence, the first part will mainly revolve around the concept of *epinoia*. It is intimately linked to the theory which is the pivot [95] of Origenian philosophy and the true innovation in ancient philosophy, namely his doctrine of freedom whose nature will be discussed in the second part. In order to understand the significance of this theory for intellectual history, we must also briefly consider its reception history at the end.

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II

[97] While Origen was able to make use of Stoic terminology in his distinction between being as essential and hypostatic and being as conceived in the mind, his doctrine of human freedom, which is the centre of his thought, is entirely specific to him, even though it found its proponents and opponents and set in motion late antique philosophy. Origen was the first to repudiate the universality to which the Greek philosophy of essence laid claim, insisting upon the volitional as against the essential, upon freedom as against nature, upon

¹ "Die philosophische Bedeutung des Kirchenvaters Origenes. Zur christlichen Kritik an der Einseitigkeit der griechischen Wesensphilosophie", in: *Theologische Quartalschrift* 165 (1985), 94–105.

the merciful as against the categorical. It is true that Origen's critique is *prima facie* directed at the Gnostics who held that spiritual beings, like other created substantial things of nature, are "constituted" in a certain way, and are thus invariably destined for perdition or heaven. In reality, however, it is a critique which also targets [98] Greek philosophy in general, since
 25 the latter had applied the category of essential or actual being to the spiritual as well, thereby falling short of the essence of freedom. No matter how the Gnostic term "essence" or "nature" is to be understood, whether in a Platonic, Aristotelian or Stoic sense, it designates something already determinate that must be distinguished from freedom or will as that which determines itself. Hence, according to Origen, a being that is what it is on
 30 account of its "constitution" (*κατασκευή* [*kataskeuḗ*]) must be distinguished from one that "has on account of change and its own decision become what it is and [expressed with a neologism] its nature". Here, then, the constituted world of immutable *hypostaseis* is opposed to the mutable world of *prohairesis*. The difference between the two realms of being is that the essential, hypostatic or natural has its being in that as which it was created.
 35 By contrast, the volitional or spiritual has its being in that into which it makes itself. It has a nature made by its freedom, as it were. Here we can see the thesis which is at the centre of Origen's philosophy and which is directed against Greek thought in general: freedom is not dependent upon an essence, but rather determines essence itself. Hence, it is not even thinkable that rational beings should have been created different. Instead, all rational being
 40 as such originally possessed "one nature", namely freedom itself, and hence carried "in itself the cause of being assigned to this or that rank of life". Difference in the realm of rational beings is not due to the will of the creator, but the freedom of these beings themselves. And since the creator has not ordered the rest of the world arbitrarily either, but according to the merits of "prior lives", all difference in the world is, ultimately, due to the freedom of
 45 created rational beings.

However, it is only the difference of the order of the spiritual world that the rational beings cause directly, constituting their own status by means of their volitional motions in their "negligence" or "moral progress". Since this place, which they have chosen of their own accord, can be left again anytime, there is nothing either permanent or substantial in this
 50 realm of created spirits. As a realm of created wills, it is the realm of the mutable and the mobile in which an archangel can become a devil, a man a demon or even the devil himself an angel. There is a certain body corresponding to each state to which a being has either

risen or fallen. Thanks to the creator's transformative power, each created rational being is always connected to the body which it "deserves". Just as rational beings have and retain
 55 their existence in the one will by which they can either descend to the lower ranks or advance to the higher ones, the body to which they are connected has its own identity, changing only its state and the concomitant qualities as, for instance, the resurrection body or "spiritual body" does *vis-à-vis* the earthly body.

Man, too, is part of the world of the volitionally mobile, of the mutable, of the
 60 changeable, of "progress and negligence". Accordingly, as a being of will or freedom, he can become an angel, since there are no natural or substantial boundaries here. Instead, it holds true of him as well "that all rational beings can come to be from all others, not immediately or at once, but rather gradually. We can become angels and demons if we are too negligent. Likewise, demons who are willing to accept the virtues can attain the dignity of angels." This
 65 doctrine of the boundlessness in the realm of the rational results from the notion of freedom or will, as conceived against the Gnostics' philosophy of nature or essence. It is specific to Origen's philosophy.

Origen has emphasized the significance of this notion of freedom not only in its cosmic dimension, but with regard to man as well. Hence, more than any other philosophy in
 70 antiquity, his may be called a philosophy of human freedom. "However, you, man, why do you not leave yourself to your own free will? Why do you take exception to you yourself becoming the cause of your salvation?", Origen asks programmatically in one place. The fact that man is free is, for Origen, one of those matters of course which cannot be shaken in their truth either by probable argument or by sophistical speech. In his everyday life, man is
 75 absolutely certain of this fact, since, for instance, one can only be praised or blamed because of it. Who, moreover, can live in such a way that "he abstains from judging anything whatsoever"? By judging, i.e., in Stoic parlance, by giving or withholding his assent, man knows that he is free. According to Origen, the assent to the truth is the foundation of all virtue and, as such, it is that which is free by and of itself and which cannot be put down to
 80 any natural quality.

[100] For this reason, Origen rejects the very idea that God might have brought about a better world by just doing away with evil and implanting virtue in man. He could only have done so at the expense of freedom, since removing the aspect of freedom from virtue effectively means the destruction of its very essence. Man's moral dimension lies in what he

85 is by himself and not in what he is on account of God's creation. Origen uses the Stoic concept of the *hegemonikon* to refer to this real and inner core of man's inner being. By opposing this concept to the Gnostic one of constitution or nature as well, he makes clear that man's inward core must not be conceived of in the way that a thing of nature or any substantial thing is conceived of. Instead, it is something untouchable, the "soul's *adyton*",
 90 the divine in us which alone is capable of receiving God in itself, the "inner man", the image of God which enables man to be responsible and accountable for what he does. Hence, Origen expressly calls it the cause of moral evil as well. Likewise, the *hegemonikon* is responsible both for the "state" of demons as demons, who have received their being as rational beings from the creator, and the changing moral quality of our actions. As this
 95 dimension of our self-determination, the *hegemonikon*, like the "little spark" of the mystics, is the divine source of our freedom. Hence, Origen can say that "we are responsible for being moral..., for nature is not the cause of evil, but the will doing wrong of its own accord."

However, if the will degenerates into moral misery, losing the power over itself, then man becomes like an animal (*ἀποθηριοῦται*) [*apotherioutai*]. For it is characteristic of
 100 animals that they act "from nature alone" or "on account of their constitution". The only possible meaning of the concept of man's animalization is that the will in negligence or carelessness leaves itself to its natural urges alone, thus becoming alienated from the divine life itself. Hence, the notion of man becoming an animal must be seen as an animalization that is willed or caused by the will (even though, however, animalization cannot be willed as
 105 such). In this sense, "there are many men who are not men at all but animals". They differ from the true man (the "man man") in the use of their freedom. Their soul has died, albeit not in substance. Origen rejects the literal Platonist metempsychosis – he also does so in his dispute with Celsus who "wants to Platonize in many things" –, because it views the soul's animalization as a substantial change such as [101] occurs in things, thereby disregarding the
 110 specific character of volitional motion. Thus, the Origenian doctrine of the soul's animalization can be seen as a critical reinterpretation of the Platonic theory, which follows necessarily from his doctrine of freedom. It made later Platonism revise the school's doctrine.

According to Origen, the neglect of the volitional aspect and, hence, of the problem
 115 of freedom is the key problem of Platonism. As Augustine did later on, Origen criticizes that the Platonists, while philosophizing about the highest good with great skill, nevertheless

descend to Piraeus to sacrifice to Artemis. They expound theories about the right life, but sacrifice a cock to Asclepius. And, finally, they worshipped man-made idols instead of honouring the truth. In other words, the Platonists who have abandoned certain traditions and customs in the name of philosophy uncritically stick to inherited customs and habits which are completely incompatible with their theoretical notion of God. Thereby, Origen avers, they refuse to “ascend to the creator”, to which theoretical reason has already ascended, in will (*τῇ προαιρέσει*) [the *prohairései*] and practical life.

However, the will’s conversion to God which finds its completion in the union with him is only possible if man knows that he is free *vis-à-vis* God as well. For God “is not a tyrant, but a king and as a king, he does not practice coercion, but persuasion. He wills that his subjects should submit to his economy of salvation so that a man’s good deed is done not in coercion, but in his own freedom.” God wills the realization of the good only on condition that freedom is preserved. Hence, he does not will anything else but freedom. In this sense, God, according to Origen, holds us in his hands, just as a potter does the clay, so that we can be formed *κατὰ κακίαν* or *κατὰ ἀρετήν* [katà kakían or katà aretén] It is true that Scripture says that no-one can steal anything out of God’s hands. However, it does not say that no-one can slip out of his hands, “for the choice is free”. Hence, man can, in negligence, extricate himself out of God’s hands. He can, as Origen emphasizes against Celsus, refuse to accept God’s words on principle, denying them his assent. However, if man and all rational beings may know that they are free *vis-à-vis* God as well, while also realizing that he will respect their decision against him, it is unthinkable that this God will bring about the *apokatastasis* of all things, i.e. universal salvation, against the will of anyone. And yet, the “heavenly Jerusalem”, the “paradise of freedom”, as Origen calls it, which, if possible, is to be home to all, continues to be the object of rational will. Hence, as has been established by modern Origen scholarship, the *apokatastasis* of all things, for Origen, cannot but be, in the words of the Plato’s *Phaedo*, a “great hope”.