Sin And The Experience Of Finiteness

Veress Károly

Professor, Ph.D., Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania. Author of the books: Paradox (tudat)állapotok (1996); A nemzedékváltás szerepe a kultúrában (1999); Filozófiai szemiotika (1999); Kisebbségi létproblémák (2000); Az értelem értelmérõl. Hermeneutikai vizsgálódások (2003); Egy létparadoxon színe és visszája. Hermeneutikai kísérlet a nem lehet-probléma megnyitására (2003); Fiinta generationala si destinul culturii (2003). E-mail: veressk@hotmail.com

Today's philosophical thinking mostly deals with the problem of sin from a religious, phenomenological or ethical point of view. This paper is an attempt to find hermeneutical points of view for the possibility of an interpretation of sin which can be opened by philosophical hermeneutics with reference to our historical being, the linguistic form of experience and the experience of finitude. The train of thoughts takes us from the analysis of the concept "original sin" to the disclosure of the speculative structure and existential meaning of the original sin. Throughout this examination, the essence of original sin is revealed as the medium and the universal experience-horizon of the history of human being and of meaning.

The *metaphysical tradition* coming into being in the history of European philosophy, so it seems, has placed the Christianly human and theological problem of original sin in the service of the accomplishment of his own needs of questioning and internal self-construction by centralizing and emphasizing it.[1] Therefore it is not so much the historical course of events and philosophical relevance of the Biblical story of the original sin which entered the terrain of philosophical research, but rather the problems which a metaphysical worldview noticed in it or projected into it, starting from its own prejudices and questions embedded into this tradition, and guided by the interpretive views and polemical approach of a given age. In this metaphysical horizon the problem of sin is connected to the metaphysical questions deriving from the difference and tension of good and evil, being and nothing, reason and freedom. In this respect Ricoeur's ideas about the concept and interpretive history of original sin are of outmost importance.

Key words:

metaphysical tradition, original sin, gnosticism, evil, experience, question, ability to differentiate, history of reception, speculative structure, unutterable

The Concept Of Original Sin

Ricoeur's starting point is the fact that there is a problem with the *concept* of original sin. This uncertain and indefinable concept mingles together and transmits in an uncritical way different kinds of false knowledge (legal, biological, theological). But in this case the false conceptual knowledge is at the same time a true *symbol* which, in its entirety, carries and mediates a comprehensive meaning, pointing beyond its conceptual content. "Original sin" in Ricoeur's understanding is the *rational symbol*[2] of everything which we confess most deeply in the confession of our sins". All false knowledge must be disrupted in order to be able to reach the true meaning of the problem lying within it; it is the "conceptual being of this concept" which must be ceased in order to let the "work of acquiring meaning" begin – as a positive avail of a critical approach –, in the course of which the true meaning of the original sin as revealed by the experience of a Christian can be regained.[3]

The concept of *original sin* is not formed in the history of the biblical sin, but much later – as a polemical concept – in the polemics of Christian theology in formation and a Gnostic way of thinking. In this process – in Ricoeur's view – the basically anti-Gnostic concept of original sin became a "quasi-Gnostic" concept in its connection with evil.[4]

Gnostics were primarily concerned with the question of *evil*. Where does the evil in the world come from? Is it originally part of the world? Or is it through man that evil is in the world? The possibilities of conceiving this problem are limited by the metaphysical view about evil, which develops the problem either in an ontological-substantial, or in an ethical-moral dimension.

From a Gnostic point of view, evil comes into man from outside, it falls onto man by the power of the world. From the moment of our birth, we find the evil in ourselves, outside ourselves, in front of ourselves. As the evil has always happened, it does not begin with me and it is started by me; the evil has its own past, it is its own tradition and prehistory. But each one of us also *comes across it*, since the evil *is already present* for the consciousness awakening to responsibility. The evil is thus revealed in the horizon of a universal human state of existence, which points beyond individual being. The sin confessed by man – in its relation with the evil perceived as such – manifests itself not so much as the commission of the evil, that is, not as an evil action, but it is rather the "*condition* of being-in-the-world", the "*misfortune* of mere existence", an "interiorized fate". Neither evil nor sin has anything to do with the personality and responsibility of the individual being, and nor has salvation, which the individual being acquires by magic liberation. Gnosticism, by "secularizing" the symbol of sin, emphasizes – in an ontological meaning – its likeness to reality and existence, which precedes its self-awareness, and – in an ethical meaning – its *community* dimension which cannot be divided into personal responsibilities.[5] From a Gnostic point of view, sin is not a *deed*, but *existence*.

In opposition to this, the teaching of the Church Fathers outlines an anti-Gnostic conception of evil. According to this evil is not "something", it is not matter, it is not substance, it is not world. The evil does not exist in the world in itself, but *by us*. In this respect the Church Fathers remained strongly connected to the tradition of the Church, to that "*penitential* tradition" (in Ricoeur's words) in the sense of which the narration of the Fall and Adam's symbol within it means that the man is, if not the absolute source, but the point of origin of the evil present in the world. According to this, sin is not identical with the world as such, but it enters the world; the sin is committed by man, it enters the world because of the deed of one particular man, the first man.[6] The tradition of the Church places thus in the forefront the action-like individuality and personal nature of sin (and the evil). In the view of the Church Fathers, sin is not *existence*, but *deed*.

However, this kind of approach is not entirely in line with the beginnings of Church tradition. The concept of sin characteristic for the beginnings of Christianity is much closer to the later Gnostic teaching than the rationalizing approach of the Church Fathers. In the view of the prophets the condition of sin is not confined to some kind of individual sinfulness. Sin

is a condition in which man is immersed, but it is power at the same time, which detains man. So we are not dealing here so much with the decline of the human condition of being, but rather with an essential human weakness, "the difference between I want and I am able", the "misery" of sin. According to this idea, "the metaphysical unity of the human race derives from the transbiological and transhistorical solidarity of sin", which is projected into the experience of a Christian as a sort of "consciousness of *us*" of the suffered sinfulness. "We too, poor sinners" – the confession states.

Similarly, in Paul the Apostle's conceptions about Adam the first man is not the first author, the first actor of sin, but much rather its first "vehicle" or carrier. Sin is such a mythical greatness beyond individuality which exceeds the person of Adam himself, and connects all the humans, from the first to the last, by "constituting" every one of them as sinners and holding them in its power.[7]

In Christian thinking – in an anti-Gnostic spirit – it is Augustine who takes the first determined steps to define the concept of sin. Augustine's perception of sin gradually incorporates several essential instances, crystallizing the basic components of the later metaphysical and ethical problem of sin.

The problem of sin at Augustine raises first of all in connection with the development of the purely "*ethical* image" of the evil. In his understanding, the man is entirely responsible for the evil, the beginning of which lies in individual actions, *declinatio, corruptio,* and which appears thus in the world as an accidental, purely irrational event. In order to draw up his point, Augustine "reshapes" certain ontological concepts taken from Neo-Platonism, referring them to human existence. According to these – and reminiscent of the ancient Greek idea of evil as *privatio boni*, the lack of good – human existence unfolds as a *defectus*, as a *decline* in the procession towards the *nothing*. As the actor of evil deeds, man does not proceed towards God, but away from God; he does not accept or take, but rather renounces or throws away his existence as a created being. "Nothing"[8] "means here not the ontological anti-pole of existence, but an existential direction, the opposite of conversion".[9]

As another component of his approach, Augustine creates the concept of "original" sin, of *naturale peccatum*. This does not signify the sins that we commit, but the condition of sin in which we find ourselves by birth. For a Christian the original sin is an *inheritance*, an inherited *vitium*. It should be noticed here that, contrary to the individual beginning of the evil, sin is about continuity and consolidation, and by the idea of *inheritance* the original sin is spread to the entire human race.[10] This statement apparently contradicts the previous one, that the beginning of evil lies in individual deeds. It seems that the Augustinian problem of sin covers a paradox: man becomes sinful by individual sinning, that is, by a willful deed, while he is also sinful through his birth (from his origin). In other words: every human being is originally sinful; however, his sinfulness is not originally given by his existence in the world, but is rooted in his individually committed personal deeds.

The anti-Gnostic conception of the beginnings seems to turn later into a Gnostic way of thinking, but this concept of sin in formation still preserves strong anti-Gnostic features in its roots or foundations. The way Augustine solves this paradox by considering Adam, the "first man", the ancestor of mankind, an individual and a historical figure, also underlines this approach: Adam commits the sin individually, but all the human beings, as they all descend from Adam, inherit it by birth, and thus are all originally sinful. "This pattern of inheritance belongs to the first man's representation as the initiator and transmitter of evil", and as such Adam is the "antitype of Christ". In order to maintain this image, the Augustinian exegesis holds back everything which would delimit the literal interpretation of the first man's role in Paul the Apostle's thoughts about Adam. Paul did not conceive of Adam's person as a concrete individual and a historical figure, but much rather as a carrier of a mythical meaning; for Augustine, all this is moved towards the statement of individuality and historicity. This is how Adam appears in the Christian interpretation of sin as the antitype of Christ; his fall, just like Christ's advent, divided history.[11]

So Augustine, by attributing the evil entirely to man, turns the purportedly anti-Gnostic concept of original sin into a quasi-Gnostic concept. Originally an aleatory deed, sin becomes human nature. The individual man is born into sin, but this has a cause which lies in Adam's personal deed. Thus divine election and rejection becomes *rationalizable* for Christian thinking: election happens through divine grace, and damnation is rightful. Augustine – as Ricoeur points out – "created the idea of sinfulness deriving from nature, inherited from the first man, and punishable as an effective criminal act, in order to justify the rightfulness of damnation".[12] This is how in Ricoeur's understanding the concept of original sin can connect sin as the meaning of the "burden inherited by birth" and the experience of an ethically reprovable, legally punishable, personal and action-like sin.

Ricoeur continues to sustain the idea of a "rationalized myth" as opposed to the Augustinian metaphysics (of the subject) which emphasizes the sin of the human individual, opening it up to the dimensions of the ethical and the historical in an attempt to rationalize it. The problem of original sin conceived in this way has no consistency of its own, and no such rational concept of sin can be derived from it which would create a connection with the ethical, legal, or material meaning of human sin. The ultimate secret of the original sin viewed from the evil we commit only reveals itself in effect if we take into consideration that "we start the evil only because of an already existing evil", which enters the world through us. And all this, anticipating any kind of metaphysical speculations, always reveals itself in the experience shared by every Christian who knows himself as a sinner by his very awareness of the original sin.[13]

Ricoeur considers that "it is not enough to separate myth from history, but the *non-historical* truth must also be found in it" (the author's emphasis). As for the secret of evil, it is revealed by the myth in the twofold perspective that although "every one of us is the starter and initiator of evil", "every one of us *also finds*" evil, which "is *already present* for every consciousness becoming aware of its responsibility". This is so because evil is also *its own* past, tradition, prehistory. Similarly, in the figure of the ancestor of the human race the myth brings together all the features which universally characterize sin experienced as a basic human condition of existence: "the reality of sin, which precedes any kind of awareness, the common dimension of sin, which cannot be divided into individual responsibilities, the weakness of will, which is shown in every actual sin".[14]

The Meaning Of Original Sin

A philosophical hermeneutical approach to the basic problem of original sin as revealed in the biblical story of the Fall and its reinterpretation expropriated by metaphysical tradition raises the question whether this discipline may yield new insights and horizons for discussion and interpretation, and whether the hermeneutical *rehabilitation* of the problem of sin inherent in the so-called "original sin" is possible.

A closer look at the biblical story of the Fall will reveal at once that it is not exactly about what its later theological reconstruction and metaphysical interpretation imply. Without the pretension of attempting to reveal all the layers, intricate meanings, and richness of the message of this story, let us only emphasize some of the elements which can be enlightening for the problem of the original sin.

Although – or exactly because – the story is so well known, it is still worthwhile to examine the most important instances in the plot. What is the content of the story itself? God, after having created the earthly world, the richness and variety of the inanimate and living nature, also created the man – to his own image and resemblance – in order for him to become the master of nature. The man was allowed to eat from any tree of the Garden of Eden, except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The man was forbidden to eat the fruit of this tree, being warned that, had he broken the interdiction, he would die. However, Eve, created by God as a partner to Adam, deceived by the artfulness of the snake, took one of the fruits of the tree, eating it together with Adam.

What were the effects and consequences of this action? The couple, awakening to human consciousness, noticed its own nakedness and hid from the face of God among the trees of the garden. Then God expelled the couple from the Garden of Eden, cursing the snake and the earth, planting enmity and suffering in the world, which He had originally created to be perfect. Thus God determined the two basic features of human condition once and for all: man became the supporter and determiner of his own existence, but at the same time he also became finite and mortal. By the fact that God secluded the tree of life from man forever, the difference between human and divine condition became irreversible.

What are the – also hermeneutically relevant – instances of this story which carry what later became the fundamental problem of original sin? The story outlines in fact a situation of experience the participants of which are the first couple. From a hermeneutical point of view, this experience is not focused on the acquiring of some kind of new material knowledge, but it is revealed as a *new experience*. The novelty of the situation lies in the fact that – as opposed to the previously repeating, closed and unproblematic nature of life in the Garden of Eden – it opens up for the condition of those who participate in it as an *event* which happens to them and is experienced by them.

One of the important instances of this situation in a hermeneutic respect is obvious even at the first approach. This instance is connected to the *linguistic* nature of the situation, that is, to the *uttering* of the divine prohibition and the *question* emerging from this prohibition. The divine prohibition, to which no explanation is added, is actually a divine word, which gains its force by the revelation itself. God does not tell something to man, but he reveals himself in the prohibition laid upon the man; this prohibition is not so much addressed to man, but it rather *utters* the difference of the divine and the humane. This is why divine prohibition carries in itself a question for the man – *Why?* –, which in the visual language of the myth is represented by the figure of the snake, and which is asked for the first time by the snake. Through this question the difference of divine and human experience, which had already been revealed in its unthinkable anticipation by the uttering of the divine prohibition, is opened up for man as well: the man is not god. This question evidently carries further questions in itself – Who is man then? How is man possible? Who am I? – along which man turns more and more towards himself, and which open up the way to the experience of his own human condition. The question which leads to man's recognition of the difference between good and evil is always rooted in the revelation of the difference between the divine and the human, and it is from here that it gains its meaning. That what is revealed by the utterance of divine prohibition opens up for man in his inquisitive concern with this prohibition as an experience. As an experience which is always rooted in divine revelation, while it carries within itself the question which opens the way to his own self. As a question to which Eve's deed is the answer, and which in its nature as question is always an answer to divine revelation.

Eve yields to the temptation of the question, as the way opened by it leads from divine revelation to human knowledge. The difference between the two also has its importance as the difference between experience and language. The onefold and complete divine *revelation* becomes a *happening* unfolding in the medium of human experience and always passing on. What is a directly achieved *elevation* in the divine language of the divine word, becomes *knowledge* in the human language of the inquisitive human word, which can be grasped, thought, and expressed in notions. But just like the human word always carries the aura of the divine word upon it, the act of human existence and reason also unfolds its own horizon of experience in the light of revelation.

A further problem of a hermeneutic import connected to the situation of the Garden of Eden is related to the *content of the experience* of this situation. The biblical story does not explain what is good and what is evil, but it speaks about the *ability to differentiate* between good and evil, about learning this ability and becoming capable of this differentiation. That is – in the words of the snake and also according to God's later reference – it speaks about a divine ability which man can also share and shares indeed by eating from the fruit of the tree. By the human experience of the difference between good and evil it becomes possible for man to do evil. The dis-

tinct experience of good and evil – as different from each other – is also based on the experience of this differentiation. However, the experience of the finiteness of human existence, the mortality of man is also connected to the acquisition of this ability, which does not only limit the possibility that man, as the opposition of God, may spread evil over the whole world, but it also confronts man with a new possibility of existence, which becomes a part of human life exactly in the horizon of his finiteness: with freedom and the human experience of living in freedom.

The human condition outlined in this new experience is not built upon one or the other of the metaphysical instances that were later developed with various emphases, but upon the mutually amplifying relations and interconnectedness of all these instances. The ability to differentiate between good and evil, the possibility of choosing on the basis of rational precepts, the perspective of human freedom and self-definition lying within these, and the interpretive horizon of the finiteness of human existence which establishes human responsibility in relation with mortal existence and the experience of death: all these together outline the basic difference between the divine and human condition – which would later acquire such a great metaphysical productivity – and the richness of human condition as well.

However, there are still some questions unanswered. Does this new experience carry a decline, a collapse for the human condition? Seen from the perspective of divine creation, it clearly became not poorer, but richer by the human condition, because it perfected the difference between good and evil, life and death, divine and human, which was already there in divine creation. The divine ability of choosing between good and evil carries within it the possibility of the wrong choice also for God himself, but the divine nature of God is revealed exactly in the fact that he *only* chooses the good, or rather that he *does not* use this liberty, he *does not* choose. Whereas the human nature of man does not lie in his learning this divine ability, as he has always possessed that by his very nature of created being, but it is perfected by human freedom deriving from the divine ability of choosing between good and evil, which is only made possible by the fact that the man is *not* God (and had not been God even previously to possessing this ability). The man's nature of created being valid even before the Fall is only intensified by God's *posterior judgment* which utters the mortality of man, the always prevalent historicity and temporality of the human being coming from dust and turning into dust. This twofold *not* carries the possibility of evil which has always been there in divine creation and the original and basic historicity of human condition in a way that it is always revealed as present in the creation by the new experience of eating the fruit, which by its very novelty projects back and completes its own structure of precedence. This means not the fall, but much rather the elevation, the self-affirmation of the human sphere of existence, and at the same time the intensification, the enrichment of its specific human contents.

Furthermore, there is the question of the *real* content of this experience. It is by no means confined only to the awareness of the nature of good and evil, and the metaphysical differences between them, even less to our enrichment with a metaphysical worldview deriving from the recognition of the difference between life and death, the divine and the human; but it is the experience of *the difference* as such. Its novelty is revealed by the ability to experience this difference and through it a new/different way of acquiring experience, which is achieved as an action restructuring the condition of the man acquiring this experience. In the course of this the meaning of the difference does not emerge as a conceptual knowledge realized by a consciousness reflecting upon and materializing this condition, but as the human perception of the *experienced* difference, as a *history of reception* in the course of which the meaning of this experience always shapes the life of the person who undergoes it. A history of reception in which the experience of living in difference has always *preceded* any kind of awareness or later interpretive instance of this experience. This difference, which – paraphrasing Gadamer's words – does not wish to be a real difference, passes along the entire history of creation in its manifold manifestations: in the difference between Adam and Eve, God

and man, creator and created world, divine goodness and the artfulness of the snake. It is also there in the divine creative word opening upon the world in its unity, and the plenitude of human questions, in the command of the prohibition addressed to man and the possibility to break it. By eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge all these differences become complete exactly because of human acceptance, in such a way that this completeness reveals its meaning – comprehensible exactly for man – by the very acceptance of the completeness and condition of human existence. This self-completing instance of the act of human existence and reason consummates divine creation itself, turning it indeed into "good", in the sense God regards everything he created as "very good".

Finally, a third question also rises: is the deed of the Fall a sin? Judged severely in an ethical context, Eve's deed is a *crime*. That is, an action which offends a previously expressed rule, an interdiction. Adam and Eve, by eating the fruit, acquire the ability of differentiating between good and evil and incorporate it into their human lives. But the very fact that Eve picks the fruit and thus chooses between good and evil accomplishes the same thing. Thus they acquire a knowledge which is already there in the experience in which they acquire it. Eve's deed is thus an answer to the question addressed to man in the divine command of prohibition, a response to the call expressed in this utterance as a *co-respondence*. This is at the same time a response to the human nature of existence revealed in this "addressedness", as the revelation of the *interconnectedness* of intellect and freedom, and human condition defined by responsibility and mortality. This deed in its singularity stands in the always performing process of the act of human existence and reason, but at the same time it clearly outlines the horizon of the meaning of human existence, passed on continuously, emerging from the experience of its finiteness and otherness, and pointing to its own perfection.

Although from an ethical point of view Eve's deed is a crime, in a metaphysical sense it contains nothing of the materiality of sin. What is essentially revealed by it, is in fact the *speculative structure* of sin: sin as something individually personal and at the same time or also as a result humanly universal; as something which bears the concreteness of participation and sharing and the abstractness of the horizon of the world emerging from it; and as something which is achieved at the same time as the deed limited by its own finiteness and the never-ending process of the happening. On the basis of these can the original sin be understood in its widest sense, as the *medium* of the emergence of the act of human existence and reason and its universal *horizon* of experience.

The original sin condensed in the biblical story of the Fall is thus *not a sin* in the material sense of the word, that is, it is not a fact which can be empirically researched, morally judged, and legally condemned. But the comprehensive unity of the original sin is dispersed in the plenitude and variety of human sins, which gains their support and final significance from it.

The irrevocable interconnectedness of human existence and reason in the original sin keeps man is a continuous state of "addressedness". But even before the sinfulness of man could have his word in the never ending *dialogue* carried out with itself and others, the speculative structure of the original sin presents as *revealed* and *understandable* by being revealed that what remains unuttered and *unutterable* in all the confessions of this sin: the hidden and ultimate meaning of the sin.

The *light of the sin* shines upon all existence and deed which, as the existence and the deed of man, enters the world *from it*, revealing and at the same time hiding the meaning of the sin.

Notes:

[1] The two central theses of the metaphysical tradition concerning the problem of sin can be defined as follows: "The evil is not a real being, but only the lack of the good"; "God, the eternal Creator is not responsible for the fact that sin is in the world; the reason of sin, on the contrary, is the finiteness of man". Cf. László Tengelyi, A bűn mint sorsesemény (Sin as an event of fate), Budapest: Atlantisz, 1992. The first thesis derives from the Greeks, the second one was constituted in a Christian circle of ideas. The metaphysical linking of the problem of the evil and the problem of sin unites the twofold – Greek and Christian – origin of the tradition of European metaphysics, organizing it into one encompassing unit of thought.

[2] By "rational symbol" Ricoeur means that "concepts do not have consistency in themselves, but they derive from analogical expressions which are analogical not because of the lack of a precise phrasing, but because of their manifold meanings. Therefore it is not false clarity that should be sought in the concept of original sin, but its analogically dark richness." Paul Ricoeur, "Az "erendendő bűn" jelentéséről" (On the meaning of the "original sin"), in Válogatott irodalomelméleti tanulmányok (Selected studies in literary theory), Budapest: Osiris, 1999, p. 87.

[3] Op. cit., p. 74.

[4] Op. cit., p. 75. Ricoeur starts from the working hypothesis that "Christian theology because of apologetic reasons – in order to defeat Gnosis – assimilated itself to the Gnostic way of thinking".

[5] Op. cit., p. 77, 89.

[6] Op. cit., p. 77, 78.

[7] Op. cit., p. 82, 88.

[8] What is more, the "nothing" in this context can hardly be differentiated from the nature of man as a creation ex nihilo, which means that he has no self-sufficient existence, but finds himself in constant dependence as a created being. Op. cit., p. 80.

[9] Op. cit., p. 78, 79.

[10] Op. cit., p. 81.

[11] Op. cit., p. 81, 82.

[12] Op. cit., p. 85, 86.

[13] Op. cit., p. 91-92.

[14] Op. cit., p. 89.