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JOHN CALVIN'S DEFENCE OF THE CONCEPTION OF ORIGINAL SIN

In this article, I present John Calvin's argument for the theory of original sin and then I point some moral difficulties resulting from his assumption. John Calvin was a sixteenth-century theologian who converted to Protestantism and developed its theology, laying the foundations for Calvinism. His most important book is entitled *Institutio religionis christianae* and was published in 1536 [1, 2].

The language of this work is filled with the expressions that stress a human misery and mediocrity. It is quite adequate with the spirit of Protestantism in general. For example, Calvin writes:

It is impossible to think of our glorious future without
immediately remembering the gloomy view of our shame and
corruption [1, p. 7].

It seems that the most problematic philosophical theses of Calvinism will be (1) the issue of predestination, and (2) the original sin. Both are closely related. Commenting the biblical story of the Forbidden fruit [3, Genesis 3, 1-24], Calvin writes that the meaning of God's prohibition consisted in verifying Adam's obedience to him. Adam, as we know, did not pass this test. The main reason for this behavior, as the author of the work indicates, was 'the lack of faith'. It is only from the lack of faith where arises the pride that has led the First Man to godless deed.

Original sin is a depravity of the nature of a man, which was absolutely perfect at the beginning [1, p. 15]. Calvin, however, maintains that this depravity has been

passed onto next generations. This view was strongly opposed by Pelagius. In his line of reasoning, the sin destroyed only Adam's nature indeed, but not his descendants. As we know, this thesis was condemned by most Christian churches and recognized as a heresy. Pelagius maintained that the example of sin – *exemplum delicti* – ultimately becomes the model of sin – *forma delicti*. If so, children are free from the original sin.

Calvin not only rejects Pelagius's argument, defining it as impudent, but also developing the idea of the righteousness of Adam's punishment. The theologian refers to the Holy Scripture:

[12] Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and died through sin, and so spread the spread to all men because all sinned - [13] for sin was indeed in the world before the law was given, but Sin is not counted where there is no law. [14] Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come [3, Romans 5: 12-14].

Calvin's attitude can be explained by the fact that he believed that the only source of Christianity was the Bible, and that Tradition should be rejected as harmful and distorting God's message. Therefore, it is easier for him to base his arguments on selected passages of Scripture and their literal interpretation. This approach, however, does not seem to be quite right. Calvin's literary style is strongly emotionally charged. For that very reason he can not accept Pelagius's arguments, which seem to be more in line with the moral intuition (i.e. thesis of the moral innocence of children). His comment expressing his indignation ends with the words 'in the face of such a bright light of truth I do not see the need to provide more evidence,' [1, p. 18]. This kind of statements exposes his arguments for a lack of serious treatment.

Calvin confine the interpretation of The Scripture and points to the only proper understanding. Such words appear, for example, in the reference to the evangelical expression that 'in Adam [we] all die.' [1, p. 19]. While developing his argument, he

also writes that the issue of transmitting 'this plague' from generation to generation is not due to the state of the soul or the body but to the divine decision. On the other hand, however, he tries to overthrow Pelagius's argument, claiming that children are born of a physical relationship and – recalling the words of St. Augustine – the nature that gives them existence, is broken. Calvin shows some inconsistency. In the further passages he writes that original sin is the depravity of nature reaching all corners of the soul [1, p. 21-23]. The Protestant theologian points that human nature is not guided by good, but on the contrary – it shows a strong inclination toward the evil. He thinks that every part of a man is overflowed with lust. Therefore, he rejects the claim that the source of evil lies only in the body, as it was maintained by Peter Lombard [1, p. 26].

On the other hand, the renewal of man through the grace of God is total. This means that God does not heal one diseased part of a man, but performs a 'complete reformation' of his all parts. Calvin maintains the assumption of the heredity of sin and at the same time he refuses the moral responsibility of God for the fall of man. Nevertheless, his omnipotence could have avoided the fall. Calvin writes that 'the obnoxious charges of such a category are repulsive for every pious mind.' but he does not explain what this 'pious mind' is, nor even propose any solution to this problem of theodicy [1, p. 28-29].

In conclusion, Calvin's work, though being primarily theological and philosophical, is overshadowed by unnecessary rhetoric and lack of proper analysis of the other's arguments. His defense of the thesis of original sin (as inherited by the next generations) seems to be incorrect. In some places the author of this text would rather agree with the argument presented by his opponent, Pelagius, who demonstrates a much higher philosophical culture. If Calvin had devoted more space to the logical analysis of his arguments and Pelagius, perhaps he would have been right. Instead, he focused on the use of *ad vanitatem* arguments.

The presented problem of the inheritance of the moral fault is one of the problems that have not been solved for centuries. According to the author of this text, insistence on this type of view is not sufficiently justified, even assuming the

hypothesis of the existence of the Christian God. It is not clear how the fault would be conveyed. Calvin's argument in this regard is far from the logic correctness. Against Calvin's thesis, I argue, not only by referring to the moral intuition, one may not share it after all. The subjectivity of every human being is based on the assumption that the subject is free. The assumption of guilt excludes such freedom. Without the possibility of autonomous action of the subject, it seems impossible to blame him for any kind of behaviour, because but such an action would not be the result of any free decision.

References:

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