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Freedom and Infinity

ABSTRACT: the goal of this article is to establish infinity as the basis of freedom. Implicitly, such a basis has been set by Augustine, Leibniz, and Kant, whose ideas of freedom are briefly investigated. The contention is defended that infinity is the source of freedom in various forms, it can be the infinity of the world, the eternity of existence, the limitlessness of knowledge, or the existence of infinite perfection. It is recognized in freedom-from and finds fulfillment in freedom-to.

KEYWORDS: Freedom • infinity • Augustine • Leibniz • Kant

The philosophical problem of freedom has constantly fascinated thinkers of different times and philosophical allegiances as important both from the theoretical and practical point of view. Freedom has almost always been regarded as a constitutive value for a truly human life, as an indispensable element constituting a human being. People become what they are through their actions, which, in turn, are human actions if they are free. When the element of freedom is suspended, a human action is only an act of nature, whereby the problem of morality, of responsibility for one's actions, and of directing one's own behavior disappears.

Freedom was invariably encountered in the context of moral issues, which is of the outmost importance when it comes to defining the essence of humanity: a human being is primarily a moral being, and the rational sphere is but a tool that moral sphere uses to achieve its goals. If we say that a person is a thinking being, then we are not fully specifying what it is to be human. What defines humans is their moral dimension, for which their cognitive dimension is an indispensable instrument.

In this context, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of freedom, which, let us repeat, is so closely related to the sphere of human morality, and thus, to the question of the essence of humanity. An interesting aspect of freedom that is rarely brought up in discussions of freedom is its connection to the question of infinity. The thesis of this article is that

freedom presupposes infinity. It can be an implicit assumption – and this is what happens most often – or it can be made explicitly; in any event, freedom is founded on infinity, which, to some extent, can be considered paradoxical. After all, humans are finite beings: their knowledge is limited, and so is their lifespan, and the scope of possibilities opened to them. So, it may seem that the assumption of infinity goes too far. However, the contention defended here is that this assumption is a necessary foundation, but first, it is worth looking at some specific philosophical solutions to the problem of freedom emphasizing in them the role of infinity. From a large number of theories of freedom, the solutions proposed by Augustine, Leibniz and Kant are briefly presented.

1.

For Augustine, the issue of freedom was extremely important from the theological and religious point of view, because it concerned the problem of sin and responsibility for the sin of people who live in the world created by God. Since humans are also created beings, are they entitled to blame God for their sins? Freedom is the key to solving this problem.

According to Augustine, without free will people cannot live morally¹. The desire for happiness is a universal human desire and no one is deprived of it. The evil people as well as the good want happiness, but the evil are not inclined to lead a virtuous life, so that “their will is such that it necessarily brings misfortune as much as they are unwilling [to have such an outcome]” (*On free will* 1.14.30).

The desires of people pull them away from an orderly life, which leads to the rejection of happiness. Free will guides people in making such a choice. The point is that free will should be good will, that is, the will “by which we desire to live righteously and honestly and to reach the highest wisdom” (1.12.25). By itself, free will is incapable of breaking out of the circle of transient truths to arrive at truths that are immutable and at the highest good. It needs guidance that must exceed its power and reach. However, the will does not have to look far: all individuals can find help within themselves, listening to the words of their inner voice. This “[voice of] truth, the highest teacher of all, teaching within [a person]” (2.2.4), “an inner light, which the bodily sense does not know” (2.8.23), will give wisdom and guidance. The

¹ In fact, “no one had previously defended to such an extent the existence and distinctness of this power in human subjectivity and no one had attributed such a significance to this discovery as Augustine,” Seweryn Blandzi, *Wolność w filozofii Kanta, Sztuka i Filozofia* 8 (1994), p. 247.

inner illumination should be the basis of decisions made by the will – if these decisions are not to lead anyone astray. Both the greatness and the smallness of humans come from the fact that they can oppose the voice of this inner light and cause reason to be used for wrong purposes, and that “no other thing makes the mind an accomplice of desire than its own will and free will” (1.11.21).

This inner light, of course, did not come out of nowhere. It was created by God as a means by which He communicates His will and His principles to people. God is an omnipotent, perfect Being, the ultimate good. If so, people can ultimately rely on the perfect guidance of God, who wants them to be happy. So, if happiness is their goal, then the opposition of the free will to the voice of the inner light is the most unreasonable manifestation of freedom. Free will manifests its freedom, however, not only by opposing this voice, i.e., the will of God, but also by acting in accordance with it. If people were to be free only when they are in conflict with God’s will, then this would not be freedom in the full sense of the word, for then people would have only one choice: to oppose God’s will. Thus, knowing the will of an omnipotent Being and acting in accordance with that will at any time does not make a person an automaton².

It is worth noting that although God knows in advance everything that will happen, this does not mean that human freedom is negated. The will would not be free if its decisions did not depend on itself, if it were not truly our will. God anticipates the decisions of our will and also anticipates our independence, so “my power is not taken away by His foreknowledge” (3.3.8)³. And precisely because this independence has also been foreseen, we are all the more sure of free will, for God’s foreknowledge is infallible.

Thus, for Augustine, God is the ultimate reference point for everything that every person does. Human freedom will find its fullest expression when it acts in accordance with God’s will. “There is no true [freedom] except to the blessed, and to those who adhere to the eternal law” (1.15.32), of which source is God. Man can rely on God because He is the perfect good, the good

² Stronger yet, “For Augustine, rebellion against God cannot improve our human status but only diminish it, because we are dependent upon Him for our being and our well-being. Thus, to seek freedom by rebelling against God is not only futile but suicidal. There can be no liberty in rebellion, but only self-destruction,” Gerold Bonner, *Freedom and necessity: St. Augustine’s teaching on divine power and human freedom*, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press 2007, p. 53.

³ Consequently, Augustine’s “entire ethics rests on the principle that the will or the personal decision determines both sin and right action,” Johannes Stelzenberger, *Conscientia bei Augustinus. Studie zur Geschichte der Moralthologie*, Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh 1959, p. 85.

that transcends all limits. The point is that God cannot even be called an infinite being, because His greatness exceeds even infinity⁴. People can know something about infinity because they have a concept of it, and because of this concept they are able to have some notion of God. So, they know that since God is transfinite, since God is absolute, He can be relied upon and unfailingly base the decisions of their free will on the decisions of God's will. In this way, freedom directed towards the infinite good takes on its full dimension.

2.

A philosophically interesting aspect of freedom is discussed by Leibniz, namely the question of God's freedom: God has in His mind an infinite number of worlds, from which the best is created. God knows the consequences of any action in each of these possible worlds, and, therefore, He is able to choose the best of them to create. It is obvious that comparing this infinite number of actions in an infinite number of worlds requires that God Himself be an infinite being. Human limited cognitive abilities cause them to think that the present world is much worse than it really is. In Leibniz's eyes, Voltaire's mocking *Candide* would be just the result of a limited vision of the world. However, if God creates the best of all worlds, is He free in this act of creation? Is He not compelled to create this world and not another? An important question, since if God is a subject of necessity, then what about His creation? Such a fatalistic vision can be found in Spinoza, whom Leibniz criticized in these words: the statement concerning God's creation of the world as it is and nothing else "is true or false depending on how it is explained. Assuming that God's will chooses the best or acts in the most perfect way, then only this [world] could have been created, but according to the very nature of things/the world considered in themselves, the world could be brought out differently"⁵. In this statement, perfection should not be equated with necessity. God has a choice between an infinite number of possible worlds, and although His nature necessarily directs Him to the best of these worlds as a candidate for being created, the other worlds still remain within the realm of possibility: "God chooses between the possibles, and it is

⁴ Augustine followed Plotinus in his vision of God as a Being who exceeds the realm of infinity. Georg Cantor saw in his set theory and in its hierarchy of alephs an avenue leading to God, whose Absolute goes beyond any infinity, cf. Adam Drozdek, Infinity in Augustine's theology, in: B.P. Göcke and Ch. Tapp (eds.), *The infinity of God: new perspectives in theology and philosophy*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press 2018, pp. 37–53.

⁵ Gottfried W. Leibniz, Ad ethicam B[enedicti] d[e] Sp[inosae], in his *Die philosophischen Schriften*, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung 1875, vol. 1, p. 149.

because of this He chose freely and this is not at all necessity: there would not be any choice nor freedom if there were possible only one resolution (*parti*)” (*Theodicy* §235).

In view of this situation, it does not seem unreasonable to say that Leibniz’s concept of God’s freedom is “very weak and restricted”⁶, because the fundamental guarantor of God’s freedom is for him the idea of possible worlds. It even seems that Leibniz introduced the concept for this very purpose, namely to explain God’s freedom. For if God is perfect, must He compare a range of different worlds and choose one to update it? Couldn’t He create the best world right away? It would be like proving a theorem *t* in a theory *T* with well-defined axioms and rules of inference without knowing the theorem before starting the proof. In Leibniz, however, it is rather like comparing the proofs of all propositions that can be formulated in the language of theory *T* and finally choosing *t*, because it is provable in *T*, and its proof is the best, shortest, and most perfect. Besides, the finite number of possible worlds does not seem worthy of the infinite mind of God. Finitude is something that can be grasped by mathematics and, thus, can be tamed by the human mind. Infinite sets are possible for Leibniz, but such sets have an inexpressible number of elements, because, for him, an infinite number is something absurd. If, therefore, possible worlds are necessary to speak of God’s freedom, then with the increase of their number the basis of this freedom becomes stronger, so that with their infinite number the infinite magnitude of possible worlds becomes its essential foundation. Thus, an infinite quantity of possible worlds is for Leibniz a guarantor of God’s freedom – at least in the matter of creation. This would be consistent with his statement that the human mind struggles with two labyrinths, i.e. problems, one of them being the problem of the nature of continuum, the other the problem of the nature of freedom, and both of them “originate in one source, which is infinity”⁷. The point is, however, that infinity is not only the source of freedom, but also its guarantor. Not quite systematic justification of this statement can also be found in Leibniz’ statement that freedom consists in intelligence, spontaneity, and contingency (*Theodicy* 288), then, “spontaneity is contingency with constraint or spontaneous is what is neither necessary nor constrained”⁸, which ties freedom through spontaneity and contingency

⁶ David Blumenfield, Freedom, contingency, and things possible in themselves, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1988), p. 95.

⁷ [Gottfried W.] Leibniz, De libertate, in: *Nouvelles lettres et opusculs inédits de Leibniz*, Paris: Auguste Durand 1857, p. 180.

⁸ Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Scientia generalis*, in his: *Philosophische Schriften*, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung 1890, vol. 7, p. 108.

directly to infinity: “contingency is rooted in infinity”, and “it appears that the root of contingency is an infinity of reasons”¹⁰. Therefore, depriving freedom of its infinite foundation could lead the human mind out of the labyrinth of freedom, but at the same time it would annihilate freedom itself.

3.

The problem of freedom is the foundation of Kant’s critique of practical reason. Kant has no doubt that people should obey the moral law. If so, they should be able to choose whether to act in a certain way or not. Otherwise, acting in accordance with the moral law would be like obeying the law of gravity, where a free body has no choice as to whether it should fall down or not. Therefore, freedom is a postulate of practical reason; not because it is thus proven that people are free, but in order for the whole construct of practical reason to be meaningful, it must be assumed that people are free beings. Freedom is here a postulate, an axiom of practical life. Without freedom, moral action would turn into the action of an automaton; without freedom, human ethics would be indistinguishable from the ethics of a thermostat that does a lot of good by regulating the temperature, but whose operation is only the result of the laws of physics.

It is worth noting that for Kant, freedom goes beyond the world of phenomena. The critique of speculative reason was interested in learning about the world of phenomena, which, according to Kant, was possible only through the forms of sensuality, the categories of intellect, and under the guidance of the ideas of reason. One of the categories was the category of causality, according to which speculative reason built science. Therefore, the world of phenomena is a determinate world, so freedom must be transferred to a sphere inaccessible to scientific cognition. Rationality in the concept of adapting to speculative reason is broken by practical reason by assuming freedom in the world of noumena, because otherwise morality becomes irrational, since it is automatic, physical. Preserving the rationality of practical reason means breaking away from the rationality of speculative reason¹¹.

Is the assumption of freedom sufficient? People would not be fully moral beings if they were limited in time, because it would not be possible

⁹ Gottfried W. Leibniz, untitled, *Die Leibniz-Handschriften der königlichen öffentlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover*, Hannover: Hahn’sche Buchhandlung 1895, p. 121.

¹⁰ Gottfried W. Leibniz, untitled, *Opusculs et fragments inédits*, Paris: Felix Alcan 1903, p. 3.

¹¹ In a way, the entire critique of speculative reason is also the breaking away from speculative reason, since the forms of sensuality and the categories of intellect are not of empirical provenance as also belonging to the world of noumena. We can thus ask, how does Kant know about them if not from empirical experience?

for them to achieve a full compliance with the moral law. If there is no such prospect, then it is difficult to speak about the desire to achieve this compliance. When people, due to their finitude, have no chance of fully actualizing the moral law, it is difficult to demand that this should happen. Freedom would be limited in advance by the perspective of the finitude of the human existence and it would immediately know the limit which it cannot cross despite the greatest efforts. Therefore, there is another postulate of practical reason, the postulate of the immortality of the soul.

Being immortal, the soul has a chance, if not to achieve the highest good, then at least to come close to it, because there is no limit to the process of approaching it. In this way, “the full conformity with the moral law can be achieved only in infinite progression”¹². It is somewhat sobering, however, to see that despite this infinity, complete compliance of actions with the moral law may be still unattainable. Immortality is necessary for the soul to continue its efforts on the path to full conformity, but from the perspective of God – whose existence is the third postulate of practical reason – a God who alone can penetrate infinity and for whom, as an infinite Being, “the condition of time is nothing”¹³, these efforts to attain the highest good suffice to be regarded as the attainment of that good itself. The path of the soul towards this good is similar to the asymptotic approach of a curve to a straight line, which can be expressed by saying that the curve will intersect the straight line in infinity.

It is worth noting that in his late writings, Kant considered God and immortality to be the products of the human mind: “in practical terms, we ourselves create these objects so that we find their ideas helpful in achieving the goals of our pure reason”¹⁴. However, while such statements have serious implications for theology, they do not have much impact on the role of infinity in the structure of practical reason, and therefore, on its role in the understanding of freedom. Infinity must be assumed as an attribute of the soul and of God, regardless of whether it is an attribute of human ideas or objective entities. However, already in the *Critique of practical reason*, Kant wrote that if “everything anthropomorphic was removed from it [the concept of God], we would only be left with the mere word”¹⁵. However, this statement seems

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1908, vol. 5, p.122 (sec. 1.2.2.4).

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Auflösung der akademischen Aufgabe: Was für Fortschritte kann die Metaphysik in Ansehung des Übersinnlichen tun?*, in his *Gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1942, vol. 20, p. 299.

¹⁵ Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, p. 138 (sec. 1.2.2.7); similarly, in the *Religion within the limits of reason alone* 4.2.1.

too strong. Even assuming that God is only an anthropomorphic construct, there is a fundamental difference here: human characteristics are infinite in God, and therefore, after excluding these characteristics from the concept of God, what remains is infinity in its pure form, infinity without content. Infinity, however, is an essential feature of God according to almost all religions, so, Kant retains here something that is an incontrovertible feature that characterizes God. Although Kant accepted with great reluctance and with many reservations the existence of God as an objective being¹⁶, or at least said that he could not say so with certainty, he retained infinity as a framework that allowed for the coherence of a critique of practical reason.

The moral law and the infinity of the world (the “starry sky”) are two things that filled Kant with “admiration and awe.” The infinity of the world makes people feel small, it suppresses human pride as masters of creation. People are free on the terrestrial globe, “among an innumerable multitude of worlds,” but it is a pernicious, physical, bestial freedom. The moral law, on the other hand, raises human eyes to the eternity that follows “when the short time during which [the creature] has been provided with life force” is ended. The moral law, “which is not limited to the conditions and limits of this life, but goes on to infinity,” gives people a signpost, defines the meaning, outlines the horizon of action, determines the path of life. Terrible freedom in an infinite world turns into one of the most important conditions that give meaning to human existence. This sense, however, does not come from freedom itself – it comes from the moral law, which can really be a moral law when the postulates of practical reason are fulfilled: freedom, immortality of the soul, infinite God. The infinity of worlds “destroys my importance,” and the infinity built into the postulates of practical reason “elevates my value” and restores optimism and the meaning of life¹⁷. Infinity was the reason for the desperation of the free individual; infinity becomes the reason for its restoration.

4.

The examples of the concept of freedom in Augustine, Leibniz, and Kant indicate that freedom is inextricably linked with infinity, although this link can manifest itself in various ways.

Freedom requires an infinite arena to truly feel free. “The will has an infinite extendibility, an infinite capacity which cannot be filled nor limited

¹⁶ Since the idea of God is necessary, at least as a regulative idea of the speculative reason, “I am not only authorized, but also forced to actualize this idea, that is, to set for it some real object,” *Critique of pure reason* A677/B705.

¹⁷ Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, pp. 161–162 (part 2, Beschluss).

by any finite good: therein is the root of freedom”¹⁸. Even the prospect of any limitation can be overwhelming, even if it is impossible to reach that limit. The mere awareness of the existence of limitations is enough to make freedom feel being extinguished. Therefore, infinity is established at the source of freedom: be it the infinity of the world, the eternity of existence, the limitlessness of knowledge, or the existence of infinite perfection. Freedom wants to know that it can spread its wings in any direction, fly wherever it wants without encountering any obstacles.

This tendency can be seen, for example, in the treatment of science. It is sometimes thought that ignorance is slavery, knowledge is not only power but also freedom, perhaps even knowledge is freedom because it is power. The expansion of knowledge is the expansion of freedom, because we are less and less dependent on the forces of nature. By learning about the forces of nature, we can use them for our purposes. An unlimited expansion of knowledge means an unlimited expansion of freedom. Knowledge is insatiable. New knowledge leads to new knowledge and opens up new prospects, and this possibility of an unlimited expansion of knowledge is intoxicating. This is freedom – to know more and more and to know that there is no end to this process. Not only the use of knowledge for practical purposes, but perhaps even more so, this expansion of knowledge is freedom, or at least it gives a sense of freedom. Isn’t that why people today feel not only to be above the people of the Middle Ages, but also freer, because the scope of today’s knowledge exceeds to an amazing extent what was known in the Middle Ages?

It seems, however, that we are dealing here with one side of the understanding of freedom. Very often, freedom is identified with freedom from rules, from recommendations, from commandments, from everything that is supposed to limit us. If this side of freedom is emphasized, then we are dealing with freedom-from: from rules, limitations, obstacles. The less limited freedom understood this way is, the freer it is. Ideally, therefore, all restrictions should disappear, but to remain with this aspect of freedom leads to its denial. Existentialists were the best to realize this, but they limited themselves to this realization without proposing any solution. We are born free beings, says existentialism, but we do not know what to do with this freedom. In the long run, unlimited possibilities lead to despair, because it is not known how to act in this freedom, how to use it. The life of a free person is therefore an absurd existence, and if humanness were defined by


¹⁸ [Constantin] Gutberlet, *Das Unendliche metaphysisch und mathematisch betrachtet*, Mainz: G. Faber’sche Buchhandlung 1878, p. 205.

freedom, it would be reduced to the absurdity of existence. As human beings, we are condemned to freedom – and thus, the blessing of freedom turns into a curse, and life becomes an absurdity from which there is no escape. This destructive vision of freedom is deepened by an infinity of possibilities. If only these possibilities could be captured, then perhaps the vision of a person condemned to freedom would not be so dark, because somehow the person could move between these possibilities.

However, this does not have to be the only solution. When we look at the proposals of Augustine and Kant, we can see that there is also the other side of freedom. Augustine spoke of an illumination coming from an infinite source, through which freedom need not remain in the darkness of uncertainty, but is able to follow infallible directions. The directions are infallible because an infinite perfection is their source. So does Kant, who, in order to maintain the coherence of the actions of practical reason, is forced to accept regulative ideas that have infinity inscribed in them. Immortality is infinity of existence and God is an infinite Being. For Augustine, God is the starting point of his considerations, because, in his view, “it is demented to doubt God’s omnipotence and justice” (*On free will* 3.18.51). For Kant, God, or rather His idea, His rather flattened image, is the point of arrival as an element needed to guarantee the coherence of the system. Kant’s vision of God is far from the vision proposed by theologians. However, despite the huge theological differences between Augustine and Kant, one thing they have in common is the recognition of infinity as the guarantor of positive freedom, that is, not freedom-from but freedom-to, freedom not *from* constraints but *through* constraints. Rules, limitations, regularities, etc. will always exist, and the point is not to get rid of them altogether – this is simply impossible – but to replace them with others that will make possible to achieve the goals. No one can escape the world of limitations, escape the reckoning with limits that cannot be crossed, or should not be crossed. The point, then, is to either work out or fight for new rules, or accept the existing ones. However, for this freedom to be complete, its basis should be infinite. Augustine and Kant were well aware of this. In his considerations, Kant came to the conclusion that it is necessary to assume the existence of God, an infinite being, as the guarantor of the validity of the moral law, and Augustine began with this assumption, and the infinite God is for him from the very beginning the guarantor and source of everything, including the moral law.

This infinity can also be found in Kant’s wonderment about the starry sky above us and the moral law within us. The starry sky is the field for expansive freedom-from, an astounding realm of reality in which and through which freedom-from can move forward unhindered. Even more amazing,

however, is the infinity within us, the infinity in the moral law found in every human being, the infinity that this moral law must presuppose in order to take its sanction into account. This is an astonishing infinity, but it also giving hope, an infinity that overcomes the apparent absurdity of the world and gives it meaning. It is most astonishing because it is not to be sought far away, but in ourselves, in the moral law, without which we would be devoid of humanity. Freedom-from's escape into the vastness of the universe to prove that it is indeed free ends up returning to itself, where it finds the infinity through which it is able to define itself as becoming freedom-to and find the foundation for positive action. In its journey towards the infinity of the universe, towards the infinity in ourselves, freedom discovers its guarantor, who stands above infinity, the Absolute.

Freedom-from felt truly free by the infinity, by throwing everything away so that what remains is bare infinity; freedom-to becomes free by the infinite foundation, by recognizing that foundation and leaning on it. To use Hegelian jargon, freedom-from recognized its limits by sublating them, recognized its impotence by its power, and returned to itself by turning to the infinite source of freedom. Infinity was the beginning and the end of the path of freedom. From the principle that movement is everything and the goal nothing, freedom has come to believe that the goal is everything and that movement is only a means, not an end in itself. "The human intellect can find peace only in infinite truth, the human will [can find it] only in infinite goodness"¹⁹. Moreover, although Pascal's person, this trembling reed, is terrified by being suspended between two abysses – the infinitely great and the infinitely small, it is through infinity that trembling can be overcome by found freedom, solace, and hope. 

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¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 167.