Augustine on Evil

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Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) was both a heretic and a saint—first one and then the other. He grew up in the late Roman empire, which was officially Catholic, but joined an alternative religion called Manicheanism when he was a teenager. He returned to the Catholic church in his 30s, and a decade later he became bishop of the town of Hippo in North Africa. In the second half of his life he wrote some of the most brilliant and influential books in the Christian tradition, which were of great importance for both Catholicism and Protestantism. The Catholic church has long honoured him as a saint, but regards Manicheanism as a heresy.

Evil as Non-being

Augustine's view of evil, which is based on a profound blend of Christian faith and Platonist philosophy, resulted from his efforts to think his way out of Manicheanism. The Manicheans were deeply concerned with the question: "Where does evil come from?" Since they were unwilling to say God created evil, they concluded it must always have existed. So evil, on their view, is just as real and eternal as God— and just as powerful. Their heresy, as Augustine later

saw it, was a kind of *dualism*, because it made God and evil into two equal principles at the foundation of all existence.

Augustine's alternative is to see evil as a kind of non-being. This may sound strange, but it follows from a fundamental conviction of the Christian faith, which is shared by Platonism: that all being is fundamentally good, for it comes from the supreme Good, which is God. The Christian way to put it is: God created everything, and everything he created is good (see Genesis 1:31). So Augustine thinks the Manicheans were right to say that God couldn't have created evil, but he has a different explanation of why: God didn't create evil because evil is not a being at all, and therefore is not a being that can be created.

Of course, this means Augustine must explain how evil can be real and present in our world if it has no being. To understand how he does this, it helps to start with an image (this is not an image Augustine himself uses; we'll get to some of those in a minute). Think of a rip or hole in a shirt. It has no being or substance of its own, but it's really there and it's bad for the shirt. Augustine could call it an evil in the shirt because in Latin, the language in which he
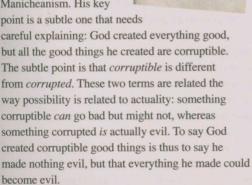
wrote, the word for "evil" is also the word for "bad" (*malum*). A shirt with a hole in it is a bad shirt, and that shows us what evil is like: it's really there and it messes things up, even though it has no true being.

Evil messes things up because it's a form of *disorder*. This is an important point, because not every hole is an evil. Some holes belong where they are, like the holes in the sleeves of your shirt that you put your arms through. It's only holes in the wrong place that are bad for the shirt. So the idea is: when you have nothing where there ought to be something (a hole where there ought to be fabric) then you have something bad. Thus badness or evil is not just any non-being; it's what happens when something is deprived of some being or goodness that properly belongs to it, like a torn shirt.

Notice how good and bad are related here: the shirt is a good thing, but the hole is bad for it and makes it a bad shirt. So for Augustine every being is good, but it can be spoiled, messed up, or disordered when it is deprived of something good it ought to have. Because this notion of deprivation is central to his thinking, Augustine's doctrine has often been called the *privative* view of evil. Augustine's own favourite term for this, however, is *corruption*, which comes from a Latin word meaning "rot" or any process that causes harm, destruction or loss of goodness. A rotten tree, a torn shirt, a ruined house, a diseased animal, and a wicked soul are all examples of corruption, of good things gone bad because they are deprived of what is good for them.

Evil in a Good Creation

So how can things go bad if God created everything good? Augustine gives a general answer to this question in the seventh book of the *Confessions*, his spiritual autobiography, where he explains how he thought his way out of Manicheanism. His key point is a subtle one that needs careful explaining: God created everything good, but all the good things he created are corruptible. The subtle point is that *corruptible* is different from *corrupted*. These two terms are related the way possibility is related to actuality: something corruptible *can* go bad but might not, whereas something corrupted *is* actually evil. To say God created corruptible good things is thus to say he made nothing evil, but that everything he made could become evil.

So why would God create corruptible things? The short answer is that there's no other way to create things. Everything other than God is corruptible, because everything other than God is created, and to be created is to be changeable—and to be changeable is to be corruptible. If you can change, Augustine thinks, then you can change for the worse. Only God is incapable of going bad, because only God is eternally, unchangeably, incorruptibly Good. Everything else is corruptible because it is changeable.

This is a thought that takes some getting used to. When Augustine speaks of changeability (or *mutability*, as the word is often translated), he has in mind a kind of weakness, a vulnerability to corruption and non-being, which is inherent in anything that comes into being. Whatever comes into being inhabits the world of time and change where things can not only be born but grow old, get ruined and die. Since only God never came into being (for he has always possessed eternal being in himself), it follows that only God is free from all possibility of corruption.

When Augustine says all created things are corruptible, therefore, he is not saying they're evil. On the contrary, he insists that everything God creates is corruptible *because* it is good. It is good but it is not God, so it is not incorruptibly good. And it is corruptible precisely because it has goodness to lose. So the very fact that things can go bad, Augustine argues, shows that they are fundamentally good. God, being perfectly good, couldn't have created them any other way.

It is worth noting here that Augustine doesn't think it limits God to talk about what God *can't* do. God can't be stupid or blind, for example, and this is not a limitation but a perfection of God. It also fits Augustine's view of evil as corruption and privation. What God can't do is to have his own goodness limited and undermined by any kind of non-being, corruption or failure. He is like light: wherever he is, there can be no darkness.

Darkness and light, in fact, are favourite metaphors in Augustine. It is important not to confuse them, however, with the kind of thinking that is black and white. Black is a real colour, just like white, and therefore in an Augustinian view it's just as good. It's the Manicheans, not Augustine, who are black-and-white thinkers, believing (to speak metaphorically) that some of the real colours of the world are evil. Augustine, by contrast, thinks in terms of darkness and light, which is different from black and white because darkness has no real being of its own. Darkness is not a form of light but simply the absence of light. It is a form of non-being, and thus a good metaphor for evil, as Augustine understands it.

Evil and Free Will

So far we have been talking about evil in a very general way. In technical terms, we have been discussing the *ontology* of evil, which is to say its place in a *theory of being*. Things get more complicated when we move from badness in general to specifically moral evil. Nonetheless, the general

For Further Reading

Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007) is one of the best of the many translations of Augustine's spiritual autobiography, which contains his extensive interactions with Manichean views of evil in books 3, 5 and 7.

------, *City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984) is a massive work containing some of Augustine's most sophisticated philosophical thinking, including his thought experiments about the origin of evil in books 11 through 14.

------, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, ed. T. Hibbs (Chicago: Gateway, 1996) is a little work ("enchiridion" means handbook) containing a concise and rigorous discussion of evil in chapters 10-16 and 24-29.

Brown, Peter, *Augustine of Hippo*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), one of the great biographies of all time, is the first place to go for an understanding of Augustine's life in historical context.

Fitzgerald, Alan, ed. *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) is the first place to go for guidance in studying particular topics in Augustine's thought.

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structure remains: moral evil is a specific form of corruption, a deprivation of goodness in a specific place—the will.

Augustine is one of the first great philosophers of free will. He thinks deeply about the will and its freedom precisely because he wants to understand its corruptibility, the way it can go bad. Much of what is wrong in the world happens because people use their free will to make bad choices.

One way this is often said is: we use our free will to choose evil. But it turns out this is a misleading way to put it. For you might think: in order to give us the freedom to choose evil, doesn't God have to create something evil for us to choose? Yet as we have seen, Augustine insists that God does not create evil. Indeed, in one sense we never choose anything evil, for every real being that's there to be chosen is good. That's why it's better, if you want to understand Augustine's view, to speak of evil choices rather than choosing evil. Evil is not a thing you choose, it's a way you choose. For moral evil is not some thing that God created, but a corruption in our will.

This leads to another subtle point. Free will is a good thing that God created in us, but Augustine thinks it is the source of moral evil. How can a good thing be the source of evil? This is another case of the difference between being corruptible and being corrupted. Free will, like every one of the good things God created, can go bad. Hence we can say: when God created free will, he made moral evil possible. We could even go so far as to say, he created the *possibility* of moral evil, but not that he created actual evil. He created the possibility of moral evil precisely by creating a good thing, our free will. It is parallel to the way God created the possibility of blindness by creating our eyes. Whenever he creates—making something good but corruptible—he makes some sort of evil possible.

But one might still wonder how evil choices are possible, if everything that has being is good. The answer, once again, is that evil is a form of *disorder*. Moral evil arises when we choose good things, but choose them in the wrong order. If you betray your friend for thirty pieces of silver, the silver in and of itself is a good thing. But by choosing the silver over the good of your friend, you have committed a great evil. The evil is not in the silver but in you, in your soul and specifically in your will, which is morally disordered because it is more devoted to money than to your friend. There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting money, but there's something deeply wrong with wanting money more than the welfare of your friend.

This kind of disorder in the will is what Augustine has in mind when he speaks of the evil will as twisted or perverted. The will is always aimed at something, choosing or desiring or loving it, and when you turn your will in the wrong direction, aiming at things in the wrong order, it becomes evil. It becomes a good

thing gone bad, like an eye that turns away from the light and starts to go blind.

Augustine frequently compares the soul to the eye in order to make a key point. Because it was created good, the soul with its free will is inherently oriented toward what is good, just as the eye is inherently oriented to seeing the light. And just as God did not give us eyes *so that* we could go blind, he did not give us freedom of will *so that* we could make evil choices. Hence for Augustine freedom of will does not mean a kind of neutrality between good and evil. Our free will is the power to make good choices—freely to love God and neighbour—which are also the kind of choices that lead to ultimate happiness and union with God. Of course when we have free will, we also have the possibility of making evil choices, which go in the opposite direction. But it is misleading, in Augustine's view, to call this possibility "freedom," just as it would be misleading to speak of the eye's "freedom" to go blind. It's a real possibility, but it is the possibility of failure, loss and corruption, not freedom.

The Origin of Moral Evil

The disordered love that lies at the heart of moral evil for Augustine means in essence choosing lower things over higher things. For Augustine thinks of the universe as a kind of hierarchy where some things are superior to others. It is important to see that for Augustine, unlike the Manicheans, to be inferior is not to be evil. Inferior things are good things, but not as good as superior things—the way a stone is not as good a thing as a human being, and a human being is not as good as God. Thus from top to bottom of the hierarchy of being, everything is good; yet evil results when we use our free will to choose lower things like silver over higher things like our friends.

With this hierarchy of being in mind, we are in a position to grasp Augustine's full answer to the question, "Where did evil come from?" Evil does have a specific point of origin in the history of creation. Interestingly, it begins before Adam and Eve. As you may recall, there was already a serpent in the garden of Eden, tempting them to make the wrong choice (Genesis 3). Augustine belongs to a long tradition of Christian thinkers who identify that serpent as the devil in disguise. However, Augustine is very intent on not letting people blame human sin on the devil. One of the main reasons he upholds our free will is so that he can insist that the evil in us is our own fault.

The devil himself is the key illustration of this point. According to Christian tradition the devil is not pure evil, as in the Manichean view. On the contrary, Satan was one of the very best things God created, existing before Adam and Eve as one of the highest of angels, but he fell from heaven because of his own evil. Thus Augustine insists he was created wholly good, but like all the angels he had to make a choice:

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would he love God above all other things and thus be eternally united to his incorruptible goodness? Or would he prefer himself to God, trying to exalt himself over the highest Good and become the basis of his own being? The blessed angels are those who choose the first way, while Satan and his angels became devils because they chose the other way.

Augustine's thinking about the devil thus presents a kind of thought experiment about how evil can originate in a wholly good creation, where there are no talking serpents or temptations of any kind except the goodness of your own being. For what Satan did, using his own free will, was to choose a good thing—himself, created good by God—but he chose to prefer this inferior good over the highest Good, which is God. You could say he loved himself more than God, except that it was a very foolish sort of self-love because it meant turning away from the source of eternal happiness and plunging into misery and darkness. But at any rate it shows how evil can originate in a good creation where there is no evil thing to choose.

The Remedy for Evil

As Augustine portrays it, the fundamental sin from which all moral evil originates is not something as external as taking a bite out of an apple. Adam did sin when he disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3, but the root of his sin is the same as Satan's: an inward perversion of the will which puts itself above God. The name for this perversion is "pride," which for Augustine is always a word for evil, a form of self-destructive arrogance. (The notion of a healthy or "proper" pride comes much later in Western history).

God's fundamental response to devilish pride is divine humility. As Satan tried to raise himself above God (and failed), God lowers himself to our level and succeeds in redeeming the humanity. He does this by taking up our humanity and making it his own in Christ, who is God in the flesh (or in equivalent terms, God *incarnate*). Augustine describes the incarnation of Christ as "the humility of God"—the Latin term could even be translated, the *humiliation* of God—because it is a great "come down" for God, who belongs at the very top of the hierarchy of being, to take on human flesh, suffering and death. But because of his great love for us, he is willing to descend to our level in order to bring us up to his level. He does not lose his unchangeable goodness by sharing the evils of our life, but rather frees us from them so that we may share his eternal life. Thus Jesus Christ, who is God among us, is the fundamental answer to the problem of evil.

Not a Modern Approach

Because Augustine's approach to the problem of evil has roots in ancient philosophy as well as Christian faith, it cuts against many common modern conceptions. Philosophically, it requires a fundamental rejection of any attempt to separate fact from value or "is" from "ought"; for in Augustine's view, as in ancient Platonism, being itself is not value-neutral but is inherently good. Some modern thinkers find this hard to swallow; others find it an attractive liberation from modern prejudices. In Augustinian thought, for example, light is not merely a physical object; it is also by its very nature an image of divine glory. To think of light this way is religiously powerful but not very modern.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of Augustine's approach to the problem of evil is that it says much more about sin than about suffering. In Augustine's view suffering, like death, is certainly an evil from which God aims to redeem us. But there is no place in Augustine's thinking for the cry of the biblical Job against the mystery of undeserved suffering. All the suffering in the world, in Augustine's view, is allowed by an omnipotent God as the just punishment for human sin, which is our own fault. In Augustine's doctrine of original sin, even infants are participants in Adam's sin, guilty and deserving of eternal damnation apart from the redemption that is in Christ. So Augustine's powerful response to the problem of evil does not look like an adequate response to the more specific problem of suffering, which is the great preoccupation of modern theodicy. A better response to that problem requires further development of his thoughts on the vulnerabilities of corruptible flesh and the redemptive meaning of the humility of God.

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