

Augustine and the Problem of Evil

Where does evil come from then, seeing that God, who is good, has created all these things good? Augustine, *Confessions*.

The problem of evil has exercised human minds for untold ages. This persistent problem has engaged professional thinkers and thoughtful persons alike in various attempts to make sense of the existence of evil in the world. In his autobiography, the twentieth-century British philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair. Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.¹

In the Bible Job questions how it can be that unjust suffering is compatible with the nature of God. Yet, possibly the first recognized philosopher to ask how the existence of evil could be compatible with the nature of God was Epicurus (*The Wrath of God* 13).² David Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* puts the following words into the mouth of Philo, “Epicurus’s old questions are yet unanswered. Is he [Deity] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”³

¹ R. Douglas Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 3.

² *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig, (London and New York: Routledge), 551.

³ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), 243.

Augustine's early search for the solution

The latter question was a lifelong preoccupation for Augustine. His interest in the problem of evil began in his youth and was possibly the major motivating force in the course of his long journey through a series of religious systems. The Book Seven of *Confessions* reveals how vigorously Augustine sought for answers to his questions regarding evil: "I anxiously sought the answer to the question, 'Where does evil come from?' How great were the pangs of my overflowing heart, what inward groans I had, my God! Yet even then Your ears were open to me, though I did not know it. When in silence I vehemently sought an answer, those silent sorrows of my soul were strong cries to Your mercy."⁴ At the time described in these lines, Augustine was thirty one and still before his conversion experience, which took place a year later. As a young man, Augustine was very skeptical with Christian answers to the problem of evil. He attended outstanding school at Madaura and received the finest education North Africa could offer. Yet, Christian Scriptures to a young student of the classical poets and orators seemed remarkably naïve and dogmatic. Instead of providing intelligible answers to the religious and philosophical questions, the Bible, and especially the content of the Old Testament seemed only to obscure the issues. Cicero's elegance, which Augustine admired seemed far more superior to the biblical stories. Despite his upbringing by a devoted Christian mother, Christianity to Augustine at best was merely one of a dozen religious and philosophical systems he might choose among. And his first choice was not the faith of his mother, but Manichaeism – gnostic dualistic sect. For nine years he aligned himself with this religious system and had the status of an *auditor*, or layman. One of the main reasons why Manichaeism looked so attractive to Augustine, was its "admirably

⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (Springdale, PA.: Whitaker House, 1996), 164.

plausible solution to a difficulty which appeared to [him] insoluble on the premises of orthodox Christianity: the problem of evil.”⁵

Fascination with Manichaeism

Mani was born in Babylonia, then under Persian control, on 14 April 216. His family belonged to the Elchasaites, a branch of Jewish Christianity through which Mani may have become acquainted with some of the gnostic ideas that we find in his system. At the age of twelve he received a “divine” revelation, and another at twenty-four. These left him convinced that the revelations of previous religious founders, notably Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus, though authentic, were incomplete, and that it was Mani’s task to bring to the world the fullness of revelation through what he called the “Religion of Light.” It is for this reason that Mani’s followers referred to him as the one in whom the Paraclete resides. Mani habitually styled himself “apostle of Jesus Christ.”⁶

The Manichee account of the problem of evil took the three “poles” of divine goodness, divine omnipotence, and the presence of evil apart by separating the goodness and the omnipotence of God. It fully accepted the reality of evil and made it a power in the universe in its own right, one of two first principles, eternally at war with the power of good.⁷ The evil power could be identified with matter, and the good, with spirit. Thus bodies were to be regarded as evil and souls as good. In human beings, compounded of body and soul, the eternal war in the universe was waged in microcosm. According to 248th psalm in

⁵ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merill, 1964), xv.

⁶ *Augustine through the Ages. An Encyclopedia*, ed. Alan Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 521.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 341.

Manichaeic Psalm-Book, “they [bodies and souls] have been enemies since the creation of the worlds.”⁸

As a Manichee, Augustine believed that both God and the principle of evil were some sort of material substances, neither deriving its existence from the other. Evil, although somehow smaller than God, was, nevertheless, infinite: “I conceived two masses contrary to one another, both limited, but the evil narrower and the good more expansive. And from this harmful beginning, other sacrilegious conceits followed me.”⁹ Thus, Manichaeism portrayed God as less than absolute, and just one of two co-eternal powers warring against each other. That went a long way toward explaining the observable ills of the present human condition, and especially the constant internal warfare to which Augustine was very conscious.

Manichaeism pictured human souls as sparks of the good spirit trapped in evil material bodies, and their salvation consisted in freeing themselves of those bodies by denying themselves physical pleasures and foods. Thus the Manichee system rationalized asceticism. G. R. Evans, discussing the reasons of Augustine’s fascination with Manichaeism, points out that “Manichees made the matter something cosmic in its scale; they took from Augustine the private responsibility for his own soul’s health on which the philosophers insisted, and allowed him to cast his burden into the cosmic maelstrom.”¹⁰ Manichaeism’s solution was supposedly found in one’s unification with the good principle through a gnosis, or true knowledge. However, Augustine has never reached that point, and thus he would become more and more dissatisfied with the system.

From *Confessions* we get a glimpse of Augustine’s doubts regarding veracity of Manichaeism even at the time when he was its devote adept. Yet, his final disillusion with it

⁸ G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 13.

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 116.

¹⁰ Evans, 13.

came after he had met one of its leaders, Faustus. “And for almost all the nine years in which with unsettled mind I had been the disciple of the Manichees, I had longed but too intensely for the coming of Faustus. The rest of the sect, whom by chance I had come upon, when unable to solve my objections about these things, still held out to me the coming of this Faustus. By meeting with him, they said, these and greater difficulties would be cleared up quickly.”¹¹ However, the meeting with Faustus did not clear up Augustine’s doubts. On contrary, Augustine perceived that he was better-educated than his “master” and even he had to suggest a program of reading to Faustus in order to help him prepare to converse with the intelligentsia of Carthage.

Some argue that even after his conversion to Christianity Augustine was never quite able to free himself of certain Manichaeic legacies in his own account of the problem of evil, for instance a sense of the dichotomy between body and soul from which stems eternal warfare in human beings, the mistrust of material things; etc. We may disagree with such conclusions, yet it is impossible to deny that after his conversion to Christianity Augustine allotted quite a few of his writings for refutation of Manichaeism’s erroneous doctrines. Thus, no doubt that the Manichaeic system of thought in general and its answer to the problem of evil in particular has left deep imprints upon the mind of this great Christian thinker, yet in such a way as to compel him to seek for more plausible solutions.

Neo-Platonic influence

Another influence that had an impact upon Augustine’s understanding of the problem of evil was neo-Platonism. In Milan, where Augustine won a post of master of rhetoric to the city’s prefect, he came into contact with a circle of philosophers who thought of themselves as *Platonici* – the movement later recognized as neo-Platonism. Platonism was thriving in Italy

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 105.

again, thanks to the works of two Greek Academicians of the third century: Plotinus and Porphyry. Neo-Platonic writings made their impact on the intellectual life of the capital of the empire through the translations of Marius Victorinus. These translations into Latin became accessible to cultured persons, like Augustine, who were deficient of Greek language. Striking similarity – Victorinus was, like Augustine, a teacher of rhetoric from North Africa, who had become a Christian!¹² Evans even suggests that this fact gave Augustine incentive to open himself to Christianity because not only the stories of two men were similar, but also Augustine’s position was close to that of Victorinus at the point of his commitment.¹³ At any rate, Neo-Platonism formed the intellectual bridge for Augustine from Manichaeism to Christianity, “they [the works of Plotinus and his followers] made clear to him that the problem of evil could be solved without having to recognize the existence of a positive, diabolical principle co-eternal with God.”¹⁴ In Plotinus’ metaphysical system the Supreme Being, the ultimate One, is in one of its aspects the Good, and evil has no place or part in it. In *Enneads* he writes:

If such be the Nature of Beings and of That which transcends all the realm of being, Evil cannot have any place among Beings or in the Beyond-Being; these are good. There remains, only if Evil exists at all, that it be situate in the realm of non-Being, that it be some mode, as it were, of the Non-Being that it have its seat in something in touch with Non-Being or to a certain degree communicate in Non-Being. By this Non-Being, of course, we are not to understand something that simply does not exist, but something of an utterly different order from Authentic-Being. . . . Some conception of it would be reached by thinking of measurelessness as opposed to measure, of the unbounded against bound, the unshaped against the principle of shape, the ever-needy against the self-sufficing: think of the ever- undefined, the never at rest, the all-accepting but never sated, utter dearth.¹⁵

Thus neo-Platonism offered an alternative to Manichaean dualism by claiming that evil exists not as authentic being but as a privation of good – the premise that became most

¹² Evans, 17.

¹³ Ibid, 22.

¹⁴ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, xxiv-v.

¹⁵ Cited in John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (San Francisco: Harpe & Row, 1977), 40.

essential in Augustine's own writings in dealing with the problem of evil. Augustine's Christian theology has also adopted the framework of Plotinus, especially in terms of hierarchical order: "at the upper extreme is the eternal reality of God; temporal, material things, the objects of the senses, occupy the lower extreme; between the extremes are found the various gradations and orders of spirituality, one of which is the order exemplified by the human soul."¹⁶ For Augustine, as for neo-Platonists, God is the ultimate of being and goodness. However, in one aspect regarding gradations of being Augustine significantly diverges from Plotinus, namely he does not hold matter to be evil. On the contrary, the whole creation, including the material world, is good, though capable of being corrupted. In fact, this is one of the central themes of Augustine's thought: the whole creation is good. This assertion makes Augustine different both from neo-Platonism and Manichaeism, the systems that claimed matter to be evil in itself. John Hick rightly sums up this distinction, "So Augustine rejects the ancient Platonic, neo-Platonic, Gnostic, and Manichaean prejudice against matter and lays the foundation for a Christian naturalism that rejoices in this world, and instead of fleeing from it as a snare to the soul, seeks to use it and share it in gratitude to God for His bountiful goodness."¹⁷

Sermons of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, were another significant factor that helped Augustine to fully abandon Manichaeism, at the same time integrating some notions from the framework of neo-Platonism. Ambrose was not against uniting Christian doctrines with those of neo-Platonism. In fact, he made use of the works of the Greek Fathers who had pioneered the work of reconciling Christianity and neo-Platonism: the Jew Philo of Alexandria and Origen in particular. Ambrose offered Augustine an account of the creation of the world in

¹⁶ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, xxviii.

¹⁷ Hick, 45.

which philosophy and Christianity were united. He provided him with the unifying principle Augustine needed to bring together everything he had held in respect in all the systems of thought he had explored. Eventually the seeds planted by insightful preaching of Ambrose sprouted in Augustine's heart and caused him to see the truth hidden in Scriptures. From Augustine's *Confessions* we know that the turning point happened in the garden of his lodging house where under much stress of contemplation and weeping Augustine heard the voice of a child saying, "take and read"; and after picking up his New Testament at Rom 13:13-14, Augustine found rest in God and truth in his Scriptures.

The problem of evil in Augustine's writings

Since the existence of evil was one of those issues that especially concerned Augustine, almost all of his writings have to say something about it. Perhaps one particular treatise *De libero arbitrio voluntatis (On Free Choice of the Will)* deals more with the problem of evil than others. However, such writings as *The City of God, Of True Religion, On the Nature of Good, Enchiridion*, as well as anti-Manichaean treatises *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus, On the Morals of the Manichaeans*, and many others have to say a lot about evil, its cause, manner of manifestation and its ramifications. Therefore, presenting the problem of evil in Augustine's writings, I will try to include Augustine's arguments from his different titles rather than limiting this overview to one particular piece. In doing so, I will keep up with the following outline: (1) Two concepts of evil: natural and moral; (2) Nature of evil; (3) Origin of evil; (4) God's foreknowledge and evil; (5) Evil as part of a total picture of good.

Two pillars of Augustine's theodicy: natural and moral evil

Later philosophers would put the problem of evil in the form of deductive argument and argue that Christian theism contradicts itself and does not give a plausible answer to the

existence of evil in the universe. The principle with slight modifications is usually presented in this sequence:

- i. God is all-good
- ii. God is all-powerful
- iii. Evil exists
- iv. If there existed some being both all-good and all-powerful, evil would not exist

No doubt that this type of epicurean argument was known to Augustine. In

Enchiridion he writes,

For if it were not a good that evil should exist, its existence would not be permitted by the omnipotent Good, who without doubt can as easily refuse to permit what He does not wish, as bring about what He does wish. And if we do not believe this, the very first sentence of our creed is endangered, wherein we profess to believe in God the Father Almighty. For He is not truly called Almighty if He cannot do whatsoever He pleased, or if the power of His almighty will is hindered by the will of any creature whatsoever.¹⁸

Thus, we see that Augustine had to accept the challenge presented by it and to provide a satisfying theodicy. His argument could be summed up in terms of two distinct concepts, one ontological and the other anthropological. Ontologically, in terms of the status of evil in the universe, he understands evil as a privation or corruption of goodness and being. Anthropologically, in terms of the effect of evil on a human being, he depicts evil as a perversion of human's good nature created in *imago Dei*. It is common to refer to the first principle as *natural evil*, and to the second as *moral evil*. These can be named as two pillars of Augustine's theodicy. Charles Mathewes gives a brilliant overview of the whole Augustinian tradition, pointing out that "*privation and perversion*: together these capture the conceptual contours within which the tradition proposes its practical response to evil."¹⁹

¹⁸ Norman L. Geisler, *What Augustine Says* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 198.

¹⁹ Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.

Nature of evil

In dealing with the nature of evil, Augustine goes against the basic notion of Manichaeism regarding evil. He seeks to undermine the ontological basis for Manichaean assertion that evil is a separate principle at work in the universe. First, Augustine similarly to Plotinus perceives evil to be not a substance, but an absence of being. His premise is that “every entity [natura], even if it is a defective one, in so far as it is an entity, is good.” (*Enchiridion* 4.12)²⁰ Secondly, as has already been pointed out, Augustine identifies goodness with being. This is probably the most essential assumption of Augustine, and it can be found in most of his treatises in which he deals with the problem of evil, “All natures, then, inasmuch as they are, and have therefore a rank and species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are certainly good. *City of God* 12.5”²¹ God is the highest good and therefore the most intensely real being. On the other hand the diminishing degrees of goodness are at the same time diminishing degrees of being. It is evident that Augustine has integrated this proposition from Plotinus. However, differently from neo-Platonism, which assumes that nature is an extension of the ultimate One, Augustine renounces the picture of emanations and holds the theory of creation *ex nihilo*. He escapes pantheism by showing that there is an absolute gap between God and his creation. Yet, the creation must be good because all that exists receives existence from God. Augustine’s argument finds big support in the first chapter of Genesis, where seven times it is said that God saw the goodness of what he had created (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Thus, for Augustine there is no evil substance.

²⁰ Hick, 49.

²¹ Geisler, 181.

According to him even those entities that depart from goodness show that they were created good (*City Of God* 12.1).²²

Augustine uses a number of terms to express the concept of evil: *malum* – “evil” and *peccatum* – “sin” are among them. *Malum* is the more inclusive term which Augustine identifies with *corruptio* (corruption) of any existing thing.²³ Evil then is nothing else than corruption either of the measure, or the form, or the order that belong to nature, “Nature therefore which has been corrupted, is called evil, for assuredly when incorrupt it is good; but even when corrupt, so far as it is nature it is good, so far as it is corrupted it is evil.” (*On the Nature of Good* 4)²⁴ Even more explicit consideration of evil as corruption is found in Augustine’s treatise *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus*:

For who can doubt that the whole of that which is called evil is nothing else than corruption? Different evils may, indeed, be called by different names; but that which is the evil of all things in which any evil is perceptible is corruption. So the corruption of the educated mind is ignorance: the corruption of the prudent mind is imprudence; the corruption of the just mind, injustice; the corruption of the brave mind, cowardice; the corruption of a calm, peaceful mind, cupidity, fear, sorrow, pride. Again, in a living body the corruption of health is pain and disease; the corruption of strength is exhaustion; the corruption of rest is toil. Again, in any corporeal thing, the corruption of beauty is ugliness; the corruption of straightness is crookedness; the corruption of order is confusion; the corruption of entireness is dismemberance, or fracture, or diminution. . . . Enough has been said to show that corruption does harm only by displacing the natural condition; and so, corruption is not nature, but against nature. And if corruption is the only evil to be found anywhere, and if corruption is not nature, no nature is evil.²⁵

From this rather long list of entries it is not difficult to conclude that Augustine understands evil as corruption extended to all finite, existing things. These things can be corrupted in a variety of ways – physically, morally, and intellectually. There are corruptions

²² Ibid., 183,

²³ Judith Ch. Stark, “The Problem of Evil: Augustine and Ricoeur,” *Augustinian Studies* 3 (1982): 111.

²⁴ Geisler, 189.

²⁵ Ibid., 111-12.

of body as well as of soul, and all of these corruptions are evil. Therefore, evil is a corruption of a good substance; evil is not itself a substance.

Another frequent phrase of Augustine by which he defines evil is *privatio boni* – “privation of good”. By this Augustine does not mean a simple lack of goodness. For example, a tree lacking spiritual qualities of an angel should not be perceived as being deprived of good. Although it is situated on a lower scale of hierarchy of existence than an angel, nevertheless its existence has some positive value. Evil enters only when some member of the universal Kingdom, whether high or low in the hierarchy, renounces its proper role in the divine scheme and ceases to be what it is meant to be.”²⁶ When things suffer a deficiency in their form they tend toward nonexistence, “we see that evil is that which falls away from essence and tends to nonexistence.” (*On the Morals of the Manichaeans* 2.2)²⁷ However, as long as nature continues to exist in any way at all, some good remains, “for corruption cannot injure it, except by taking away from or diminishing that which is good.” Therefore, evil as the corruption and, privation of a good nature has for Augustine precise ontological implications, namely that as the corruption continues the entity loses both the goodness and the being proper to it: the just man becomes unjust, the brave man cowardly, the healthy body diseased, the beautiful body ugly. On the other hand the supreme good is incorruptible and separate from corruptible substance. Thus, we can conclude that according to Augustine evil has no positive value and is parasitic in nature. There can be no evil where there is no good.

Origin of evil

This, however, raises another important question. If all things have been created good by a good God, how is it that evil enters the world? How does *privatio boni* come about?

²⁶ Hick, 47.

²⁷ Geisler, 188.

Where does the corruption come from? Because Manichees claimed not only to explain evil but also how it occurred, Augustine has to address the question of the origin of evil.

First, Augustine attributes the origin of evil to the abuse of freedom with which God endowed rational beings. His answer to the above mentioned questions is very straight, “an evil will [*improba voluntas*] is the cause of all evils.” (*On Free Will*. 3.17.48)²⁸ Augustine makes a distinction between a *good* and a *bad* will. As a part of all creation man was created by God with a good will. Yet, this good will was free to become evil:

The good will, then is a work of God, since man was created by God with a good will. On the contrary, the first bad will, which was present in man before any of his deeds, was rather a falling away from the work of God into man’s own works than a positive work itself; in fact, a fall into bad works, since they were “according to man” an not “according to God.” Thus, this bad will or, what is the same, man is so far as his will is bad, is like a bad tree which brings forth these bad works like bad fruit. (*City of God* 14.11)²⁹

In other words, the free will for Augustine implies the ability to do evil. Agents with free will are capable of performing free acts that can be either good or evil. First, angels and then human beings freely chose to turn from God to creation, and in this way evil was conceived, “the cause of evil is the defection of the will of a being who is mutably good from the Good which is immutable.” (*Enchiridion* 8.23)³⁰ Augustine is very precise in describing the process by which a good will becomes evil, “For when the will abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it become evil – not because that is evil to which it turns, but because the turning itself is wicked.” (*City of God* 12.6)³¹ Therefore, according to Augustine there was no evil in creation before angelic and human sin. It came into existence when first angels, and then humans misused their wills turning from their creator.

²⁸ Hick, 59.

²⁹ Geisler, 153.

³⁰ Hick, 59.

³¹ *Ibid.* 60.

But if one were to go even further and asks about the cause of this turning of the will from higher good to the lower, Augustine would give an honest and yet a surprising answer: “Let no one, then, seek to know from me what I know that I do not know.” (*City of God* 12.7)³² According to him to seek the causes of this defection is as if someone sought to see darkness, or hear silence. Thus, the problem of evil is wrapped up in mystery. Augustine does not presume of being able to give all the answers to it. He goes as far as to perceive that evil willing is a self-originating act and as such is not explicable in terms of causes, for “what cause of willing can there be which is prior to willing?” (*On Free Will* 3.17.49)³³

Being unable to point out the cause of bad willing, Augustine, nonetheless, shows that the possibility of such turning of the will is coherent with the notion of creation *ex nihilo*. God made all things, not of himself, but from him and out of nothing: “All corruptible natures, therefore, are natures at all only so far as they are from God [de Deo], for they would not be corruptible if they were of God [ex Deo]. Therefore, of whatever measure, form, or order they are, they are so because it is God by whom they were made; but they are not immutable, because they were made out of nothing.” (*Nature of Good* 10)³⁴ Thus, because things were made *ex nihilo*, they all have within them the tendency toward non-existence. In the moral dimension nothingness is also the source of the movement of the will from immutable to mutable goods. As such, it is a defective movement, and since every defect comes from nothing, this movement comes from nothing. It is amazing to see how applying this principle Augustine counsels his readers to abhor the sin and yet to continue to love the sinner, because the most wicked person remains good insofar as he continues to exist.³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. 61.

³⁴ Stark, 114.

³⁵ Ibid., 116.

Therefore, Augustine's argument could be summarized as follows. All things have been called into existence by God out of nothing and through corruption they tend to lapse back into nothingness. Since agents with free will, namely angelic and human beings, are part of the creation *ex nihilo*, they are mutable and capable of turning away from God. This turning, which results from a voluntary defection from a higher to a lower good, is precisely the origin of evil and corruption. The cause of willing is a mystery that goes beyond human understanding.

God's foreknowledge and evil

The first question that is usually asked with regard to God's foreknowledge and evil is this: knowing the horrible consequences, why did not God prevent Adam from sinning? Augustine gives the following answer: "God indeed had the power to make humans who could not sin. But He preferred to make them so that they had the power to sin or not sin as they wished. As a result there would be humans who gained merit from not sinning in this life and who received in the next the reward of not being able to sin."³⁶ Thus, being able to sin did not mean that those first humans would sin. Augustine holds that having the possibility of sin is better than not having it. Creating human beings with the free will, which could lead them to sinning, was better than giving them the will, which could not sin. God could have created humans that were not able to sin, however, "God judged that men would serve him better if they served him freely. That could not be if they served him by necessity and not by free will." (*Of True Religion* 14)³⁷

This leads to the question of culpability for the origin of evil. If the origin of evil falls within the all-encompassing purpose of God, does it not lay upon God the ultimate responsibility for the existence of evil? Augustine argues that God's foreknowledge is not an

³⁶ Donald X. Burt, "Courageous Optimism", *Augustinian Studies* 21 (1990):60.

³⁷ Geisler, 153.

externally compelling force that would render humans not culpable for their sins. Because free will entails moral responsibility, it is man, not God, that is responsible for sin. Sin is a voluntary evil. “In fact sin is so much a voluntary evil that it is not sin at all unless it is voluntary.” (*Of True Religion* 14)³⁸ Augustine defines the will as “a movement of mind, no one compelling., either for not losing or for obtaining something.”³⁹ Sinning, therefore, takes place only by exercise of the will. The turning of the will from God is free, not necessary. In *Free Choice of the Will* Augustine points out that the human falling away from God was not like the falling of a stone, controlled by forces outside itself.⁴⁰ It was a self-controlled choice of oneself over God. Free persons are under no necessity to act immorally. Again, in *True Religion* Augustine writes, “Sin is the will [a movement of soul, nothing compelling] to retain and follow after what justice forbids and from which it is free to abstain.”⁴¹ Therefore, the will is the only source of moral evil and as such is solely responsible for it.

On the other hand, if one were to conclude from this that human freedom nullifies divine foreknowledge, Augustine would not agree. If God foreknows all future states of affairs, then it is right to maintain that those states of affairs must occur. This must occur because God can never be wrong about what he knows. However, if the objects of God’s knowledge include free acts, then, by definition these acts cannot be necessary. As free acts they are not necessary in the same sense that they are necessary as objects of God’s knowledge.

It does not follow that, though there is for God a certain order of all causes, their must therefore be nothing depending on free exercise of our own free wills, for our wills themselves are included in that order of courses which is certain to God, and is embraced by his foreknowledge, for human wills are also causes of human actions;

³⁸ Ibid., 155.

³⁹ Ibid, 157.

⁴⁰ Burt, 59.

⁴¹ Stark, 117.

and he who foreknew all the causes of things would certainly among those causes not have been ignorant of our wills. (*City of God*. 5.9)⁴²

Thus, human freedom is not equivalent to randomness, indeterminacy or unpredictability. However, Augustine goes even further, arguing that divine foreknowledge, not only does not remove freedom, but on contrary, guarantees that humans will have the power to exercise freedom in the future.

For when [God] has foreknowledge of our will, it is going to be the will that He has foreknown. Therefore, the will is going to be a will because God has foreknowledge of it. Nor can it be a will if it is not in our power. Therefore, God also has knowledge of our power over it. So the power is not taken from me by His foreknowledge; but because of His foreknowledge, the power to will will more certainly be present in me, since God, whose foreknowledge does not err, has foreknown that I shall have the power. (*On Free Will* 3.3)⁴³

Summarizing Augustine's argument we can say that for him God's omniscience and free will are fully compatible. On the one hand, divine foreknowledge does not make real freedom impossible; on the other hand it does not mitigate human responsibility when such freedom is exercised.

The best possible world

The last component of Augustine's theodicy is what John Hick has titled as *aesthetic theme*, or some others as *aesthetic optimism* of Augustine. The basic assumption of this theme is that the universe is wholly good despite the presence of evil in it. For Augustine even evil within God's universe contributes to the complex perfection of the whole. Harnack gets the gist of the matter, saying "Augustine never tires of realizing the beauty (*pulchrum*) and fitness (*aptum*) of creation, of regarding the universe as an ordered work of art, in which the gradations are as admirable as the contrasts. The individual and evil are lost to view in the

⁴² Hick, 68.

⁴³ R. Douglas Geivett, *Evil and the Evidence for God* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 16.

notion of beauty. . . . Even hell, the damnation of sinners, is, as an act in the ordination of evils (ordination malorum), an indispensable part of the work of art.”⁴⁴

Augustine sees the perfection of the creation not as a static structure, but as an organic process that involves ceaseless change. He suggests that creation in its totality, seen from the standpoint of the Creator, is beautifully harmonized and wholly good. “To You nothing whatever is evil, and not only to You but also Your creation as a whole...”⁴⁵ The reason that humans tend to be offended at the order of existing things is their finiteness which does not allow seeing the whole picture. “Of this order the beauty does not strike us, because by our mortal frailty we are so involved in a part of it, that we cannot perceive the whole, in which these fragments that offend us are harmonized with the most accurate fitness and beauty.”

(*City of God*. 12.4)⁴⁶ Augustine compares the existence of evil with a black color in a picture. By itself it is very unpleasant color, yet in the picture it serves a particular purpose of an artist and without it the picture could not be so beautiful. It seems that Augustine at some point in his life was blessed to get a glimpse of the beauty of creation as it is seen from the Creator’s prism. Highly inspired by that he writes, “I no longer wished for a better world. I had come to see that though higher things are better than the lower, the sum of all creation is better than the higher things alone.” (*Confessions* 7.13)⁴⁷

However, what about the human side of the picture? Does Augustine’s aesthetic optimism properly account for moral evil? Augustine’s argument at this point goes back to the freedom of the will. God could have chosen either not to create free beings or to create them without the ability of free choice. Augustine clearly believes that it was better for a free being

⁴⁴ Cited by Hick, 82.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 172.

⁴⁶ Hick, 86.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 172.

to have lived and failed than never to have lived at all. “Just as a stray horse is better than a stone which is not astray, since the stone does not have its own motion or perception, so the creature who sins with his free will is more excellent than the creature who does not sin because he has no free will.” (*On Free Choice of the Will* 3.5.56)⁴⁸ In addition, Augustine points out that sins get their retribution, and therefore the balance of the moral order is preserved. A universe in which sin exists but gets its punishment is no less good than a universe in which there is neither sin nor punishment.

If souls will to sin, they sin. If they have sinned, they become unhappy. If unhappiness were to go on existing even after these souls had ceased to sin, or if happiness preceded sin, the order and government of the universe could properly be said to be ill-formed. If sin occurred and unhappiness did not result from it, then evil would violate order. As long as men who do not sin gain happiness, the universe is perfect. When sinners are unhappy, the universe is perfect. Since there are souls that gain happiness because they do right and souls that are unhappy because of sin, the universe is always full and perfect. (*On the Free Choice of the Will* 3.9.93-4)⁴⁹

Moreover, Augustine is convinced that not only the good order of the created universe is not marred by sin but also that God accomplishes a greater good by permitting evil. Even evil desires of the wicked men are used by God for his own good purposes as in the case of Joseph’s brothers selling him to Egypt or Jews delivering Jesus for death. Augustine adopts Joseph’s explanation to his brothers: “you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.” Gen 50:20 (NKJV) Thus, to the question, “why did God choose to create this particular universe, knowing that human beings would abuse their freedom and sin?” Augustine convincingly replies, “God judged it better to bring good out of evil, than not to permit any evil to exist.” (*Enchiridion*

⁴⁸ Augustine, *On the Choice of the Free Will*, 98.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, 108.

27)⁵⁰ In the words of Gottfried Leibniz, Augustine believed that the present world is “the best possible world.”

Summary and conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to present the problem of evil as it is found in the writings of one of the greatest Christian thinkers ever, namely Augustine. My strategy in approaching the subject was first to discuss the influences that molded Augustine’s perception of the problem and only then to deal with the issues that stem from the subject.

Evidently nine years spent in Manichaeism have left deep imprints upon the mind of Augustine. His early fascination with Manichaeism seems to have been fueled precisely because he thought that he found the answer to the haunting question, “where does evil come from?” Augustine’s disappointment with and eventual disentanglement from Manichaeism led him to seek for the answers elsewhere. Yet, his acquaintance with this thought system later helped him in refuting its propositions. I do not agree with those who suggest that Augustine never fully abandoned the Manichaean dualism. In my opinion, some measure of dualism in Augustine’s writings stems from the biblical teaching on incompatibility of the “carnal” and spiritual ways of Christian living rather than from Manichaeism. Augustine’s treatises against Manichees are convincing enough to show his full rejection of the claims of that system.

Neo-Platonism was the second major influence upon Augustine. Yet, it would be unfair to conclude that all major tenets of Augustine’s theodicy come from Plotinus. As we have seen Augustine substantially differs from neo-Platonism, for instance claiming that matter is not evil. I agree with those who claim that neo-Platonism for Augustine was like a bridge leading him from Manichaeism to Christianity. However, we should not forget that the Bible, after Augustine had found peace in Christ, became the final authority against which he

⁵⁰ Geisler, 199.

was testing not only the arguments of his opponents, but also his own. The purpose of this paper was not to show how Scripture was influencing Augustine's understanding of evil. I assumed that this point is self-evident. Anyone, at least a little bit acquainted with Augustine's writings, will find out that Augustine is not simply a theist; he is a deeply devoted Christian theist.

The bulk of my paper was focused on five major themes that make, so to speak, Augustine's theodicy. My main intent was to show the consistency of Augustine's arguments. The space of this paper did not allow me going into criticisms that Augustine's theodicy received throughout the history of philosophy. Indeed some have vehemently criticized him, and yet others have made him into a saint. One thing remains sure – Augustine's input both into the course of Christian theology and into the history of philosophy of religion is huge. The problem of evil, as presented in his writings, perhaps is not flawless, and certainly has some paradoxes. Yet, I suggest that Augustine's "free-will" theodicy, although not the only one Christian theodicy, nonetheless, is very powerful and relevant for modern Christian apologetics and evangelism. Constantly Christians are being asked, "If God, on whom you believe, really exists, why there is so much evil in the world?" Augustine's answer to this question is not superficial and it is not inconsistent. We may use it, trusting that the Lord will touch the hearts of those asking. Finally, I believe that Christians themselves have many unanswered questions with regard to the problem of evil. Augustine's insightful thoughts may answer some of them or at least evoke the zeal for further studies. Existentially the problem of evil is relevant to every human being, and yet not easily solved. "Where does evil come from then, seeing that God, who is good, has created all these things good?" Indeed this question of

Augustine reveals a great paradox; and yet the journey, on which it takes the one trying to resolve it, will certainly be rewarding in every way.

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