

CRITIQUE OF AUGUSTINE'S VIEW OF EVIL

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Augustine's treatment of the problem of evil falls short for two related reasons. (1) He did not properly distinguish natural and moral evil, suffering and sin, pain and guilt. In his thought, they amounted to the same problem. (2) He attempted to examine even moral evil primarily in reference to the category of nature. In so doing, he glossed over the distinction between impersonal and interpersonal reality.

Natural and Moral Evil

Punishment and pain

The first problem with Augustine's doctrine of evil lies in the relationship of moral and natural evil. He was right in relating natural and moral evil, in putting natural evil after moral evil, and in seeing natural evil as penalty for moral evil. Genesis pictures mankind's less than ideal circumstance as brought on by disobedience. God removed him from the Garden and subsequently sent the Flood that left the world in an even less ideal form.

However, bonding together natural and moral evil fails to distinguish the qualitative difference between punishment and pain. According to the biblical materials, the exile from Eden punished Adam and Eve, and the deluge destroyed Noah's generation because of its sin. But scripture does not indicate in either case that their descendants were also being punished even though they also suffered loss. In fact, preserving Noah's family indicates that the Judge of all the earth does not punish the righteous with the wicked, *"Come into the ark, you and your family, because I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation"* (Genesis 7:1). On this same basis, Abraham interceded for Lot's family when Yahveh designed to destroy the cities of the plain (Genesis 18:23; cp. Exodus 23:20; 20:13; Deuteronomy 27:25). Romans 5:14 says, *"Death reigned from Adam till Moses, even over those who had not sinned after the likeness of Adam's transgression."* Paul does not say God counted them sinners for Adam's sin, but that death reigned over them from Adam's sin. The social condition means that good people can get hurt when bad people sin.

Genesis 3 shows that (a) suffering comes ultimately from the fact of sin, but the Book of Job shows that (b) there is not necessarily a suffering for a sin the person himself commits.¹ Of course, (c) there may be such a correspondence if God punishes either directly or indirectly.² (d) Those who suffer are not necessarily more sinful than those who do not.³ Punishment to Adam and Eve is simply pain to their progeny.

Originating causes of evil

Bonding together natural and moral evil fails to distinguish how they originated. In the biblical account, suffering originated from a direct, positive disordering by God on the occasion of sin. He expelled Adam and Eve from Eden when they sinned (Genesis 3:22-24). He brought the Flood when people's thoughts became only evil continually (Genesis 6:5). He confused their language at Babel when their pride started reaching to heaven (Genesis 11:1-9). Sin, however, originated in people's free will before they would have deteriorated, lacked, or been deprived of anything. God's disordering represents a cause outside the world system. People sinned before anything inside the natural system had changed. Natural evil came from outside the process; moral evil came from inside it.

People's sin and natural calamity do not necessarily have an inherent, cause-effect relationship. Instead, they have two different causes both in identity and kind. Therefore, sin and suffering must be treated as different issues in the larger problem of evil. They are different in their originating causes. Pain is caused by God from outside the natural realm; sin is caused by people from inside nature, that is, suffering by exogenous disordering and sin by endogenous free will. They are related in their originating occasion: sin by people's free will was the occasion for suffering by God's disordering. Free will and disordering were the instrumental causes of sin and suffering respectively; sin was the occasional cause of suffering. The originating instrumental causes differ in identity and kind, while related by time.

It is not evident from scripture that natural evil originated through Adam as a direct result of his sin. Paul says, *"The creation was subjected to vanity, not willingly, but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God"* (Romans 8:20-21). The statement may not disprove inherent causation of corruption, but it certainly looks away from it. Neither this passage nor any other text requires an inherent causal connection between sin and suffering. Genesis does not present human death as caused by Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit or touching the tree, but by God's separating them from the tree of life that would sustain them. Satan's statement, *"You will not surely die"* represents the half-truth that Adam and Eve would not die from the disobedience itself. He suppressed the further truth that they would die because God would separate them from the source of life.

Other penalties illustrate varying degrees of disorder, but not as inherent results of sin. Women's pain in childbirth and the "serpent's" slithering in the dirt do not illustrate inherent result. Although it may be difficult to disprove Augustine's theory, we cannot allow proof by default, especially since his theory is not the only possibility. Falsification cannot happen if verification cannot happen. Augustine's concept lacks primary evidence; hence, his conclusion

cannot be shown from these materials. He impressed his construction on the data, a construction that is interesting and plausible in certain aspects, but not obvious or necessary as a general motif.

Scripture does not require the concept of privation nor the idea that concupiscence stems from privation in human nature. Furthermore, its implications created difficulties in Augustine's understanding of marriage. He did not distinguish between a husband's desire toward his wife and a man's lust for a woman. He justified patriarchal polygamy and concubinage because these practices supposedly did not come from concupiscence but from desire for progeny. The thing wrong with adultery is concupiscence, which makes one wonder what makes marriage unique.⁴

This general confusion about sexuality in early Christendom shows itself in the constant exaltation of celibacy, especially among the clergy. It is at one with the notion of three levels of sexual purity: in ascending order were faithfulness in marriage, celibacy in marriage from the time of conversion, and lifelong celibacy. Confusion about sexuality is responsible for the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary and sexual relations for procreation only. The inadequacy of a view can often be seen in the excesses to which it leads when carried to its logical conclusion.

Continuing causes of evil

Bonding together natural and moral evil fails to distinguish how they are perpetuated. Putting moral sin into the same category as natural evil means that the continuing cause of sin relates to sin in the same way as the continuing cause of suffering relates to suffering. Personal evil and impersonal evil are modeled alike. This model means that the cause of sin lies in the form-lack in human nature in the same way as the cause of natural catastrophe lies in the form-lack in nature. The absence of a degree of form causes both human sin and human suffering. Natural evil and moral sin are of the same kind and of the same cause; they are both deterministic.

This reasoning is done despite the evident difference in their manner of origin, which implies something theoretically about the difference in their manner of perpetuation. It is done despite any clear biblical support for the idea that moral sin actually comes from a natural loss incurred by the human race as a result of Adam's original sin whether by inherent consequence upon himself or by divine disablement upon his nature. We affirm instead that the continuing instrumental causes are different in identity and kind.

Sin is not said anywhere in scripture to be perpetuated by a privation akin to Augustine's theory. Other reasons besides the hypothetical fallen nature sufficiently explain the continued presence of sin in the human race everywhere. We have noted these elsewhere in our presentation of psychological depravity.⁵

(1) Ignorance can be simply the lack of knowledge. The subjective viewpoint means that we see the rest of reality from our own position. Subjective viewpoint fosters self-centeredness, which is the essence of sin. We can transcend our viewpoint, and we can project our viewpoint over behind the eyes of another person; but we can get in the habit of not doing so, especially because it is easier not to do it. There is nothing wrong with individual perspective, but it can become wrong by our failure to choose to transcend it and project it. The present invisibility of God is a third type of ignorance. “Out of sight, out of mind” causes us to live as if God does not exist. The restraining and motivating influence of his presence is lost. We can live as if we see him who is invisible, but we can get in the habit of not doing so because it is easier.

(2) Society adds evil example, social pressure, misunderstood good example, and reinforcement as reasons people sin. Sin is not just present in example but aimed at us in social pressure. Not only so, but people applaud us when we do as they expect, which reinforces our tendency to repeat that behavior. Reinforced action tends to recur, particularly if it is reinforced by our significant others. There is nothing wrong with our desire for acceptance, but it can become wrong when social acceptance overrides principled behavior. To a great extent, sin is socially transmitted.

(3) Our physical constitution produces bodily drives. There is nothing wrong with any of these drives, but they can be fulfilled in wrong ways. It is easier to yield to immediate gratification than to qualify their fulfillment by transcendent values that sometimes call for delayed gratification. In many cases the flesh is the gateway to sin.

Ignorance, social existence, and physical nature originate sin in individuals and perpetuate it from generation to generation. They sufficiently explain its uniform, all-pervasive, and universal presence in society generally, in each person, and in every aspect of each person. They adequately account for independent origins of sin and for its social transmission. Adding natural depravity and biological transmission is unnecessary as well as confusing to people’s understanding of the Christian system.

Augustine’s attempt to model interpersonal matters according to impersonal principles necessarily led to confusion. What was lost in Adam’s Fall was not an ability not to sin, but a relationship with God, and that only as far as he was concerned. There is no biblical reason to suppose that Adam’s inheritable nature after the Fall was any different from what it was before in a biologically inheritable sense. There is no biblical reason to suppose that his descendant’s nature was any different from what his was before he fell. Whatever caused unfallen Adam to sin can be the sufficient recurring cause of each person’s sin.

Pristine, fallen, and regenerate people fight much the same battle, or it would not likely be said of Christ, “*He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15). He

is the very One Augustine said was only in the “likeness” of sinful flesh. Jesus presumably would compare with pristine mankind if anyone would; yet the Hebrew writer compares his temptation with ours as a basis for encouraging our perseverance. His example would offer little encouragement if his experience were different from ours or significantly less intense than ours. Unfallen man fell; fallen men sin; regenerate men fight the battle Paul describes in Romans 7. What was lost in the Fall, absent in the fallen, present in the restored cannot be an essentially natural matter. Practical difficulties are common to us in these three states even though the degree of them may differ. Variation from person to person and state to state is a matter of degree, not kind. The continuing cause of sin is not known to be a matter of a lesser natural capacity.

Sin affects nature and brings a degree of enslavement to the practice of sin, but it is the fallacy of false cause to explain this enslavement as a loss in the form of nature. Sin is not due to dissolution, but to misdirection; it is not a change in nature, but a misuse of will. Enslavement to sin, generally at least, is not due to dissolution, but to “ingrainment.” It is not a nature problem, but a psychological problem. The question is not whether sin affects nature, but how and how much. The question is not whether nature affects behavior, but how and how much. If behavior affects nature, it is not usually to an irreversible degree; the general proposition is that everything psychological that comes about through experience can be reversed by new experience. Even if in exceptional cases it is to an irreversible degree, it is not inheritable. If it were inheritable, it would not be reckoned in evaluating status. Nature affects behavior, but it does not determine it. If sin is not natural, it is not biologically inheritable. If the nature did not fall, heredity does not transmit the fallen nature. Conversion and sanctification involve change of behavior, not reformation of nature. They involve changed action, not reordered being.

Nature and criterion of evil

In regard to the criterion of natural evil, Augustine’s concept of the “long term,” or “whole picture,” is both helpful or in accordance with the apparent import of Genesis 3:22, “*God said, ‘In [the process of experientially] knowing evil as well as good, mankind has [by exercising his autonomy to the exclusion of our will] become like one of us [in acting autonomously].’*” The reason God made human existence less than ideal was to show them by the experience of suffering and death that they are dependent beings, a fact they cannot escape,⁶ a fact that implied their lack of autonomy, a fact designed to prepare them for depending on the Independent One (James 4:13-17). Although all suffering is for the time grievous (Hebrews 12:11), in the long term this natural evil can be a blessing in disguise. It has an educational and disciplinary value.

The long-term idea can apply even to moral evil. Originating from what is not God, evil eventually glorifies him in the very occasion it provides for his continually and finally

overthrowing it. The idea, however, that actual evil is necessary for defining the goodness of good does not follow from Augustine's basic construct.⁷ Goodness can still be good (a) on the principle of harmony vs. the theoretical postulate of disharmony or (b) on the basis of harmony between the construct and the end for which God constructed it. Augustine's concept of the nature of sin cannot be successfully criticized on the principle of consistency at this point. Criticisms must be directed at more elemental matters in his system.

Distinction in causal modes

Binding together natural and moral evil fails to distinguish how they cause their effects. Natural evil usually sets off a straight-line causal series, where the same cause produces the same effect because of internal necessity. That causal mode applies to the impersonal realm, and the format is one-to-one between cause and effect. That uniformity provides the basis of science and scientific predictability. Moral evil, however, occurs in the personal realm and involves the kind of nature called "will." The distinguishing feature of will lies in its potential for giving different kinds of responses to the same stimulus. The response depends here on an external value system that has been internalized through learning and is subject to change via reason, influence, *etc.* Trying to conceive of "will" on the analogy of non-will is like trying to model a tree on the analogy of a rock, or a squirrel on the analogy of a tree, or a man on the analogy of a squirrel. The aspects of a more complex category form a unique construct.

We propose that action passes through will, but the origination of evil lies in the rational capacity of imagination. Rationality more than desire is what originates the possibility of sin. Rationality can create the possibility of manipulating the good that comes to a person from the outside. Negation is one formal process that can suggest the idea of doing other than, even opposite of, what is commanded. It enables a person to penetrate a situation by thought. Eve could imagine, so she thought, what it would be like to have the benefits Satan described. Thinking of the possibility of disobedience is not sin; consequently, reason is what generates alternatives to actions commanded to accomplish divine purposes. These thoughts reinforced by emotion and physical drives are activated through the will.

An infinite regress is avoided by tracing back the cause-effect series to a source that can go in various ways under the same circumstance. That source is the rational capacity, which is activated through the will and performed by the body. Augustine's system, on the other hand, plunges him into an infinite regress because sin must come from deformed nature, which in turn comes from sin, and so forth. Such a construct affords no point where sin originates from good as time moves forward nor a beginning point where sin ceases to be found as one moves backward in search of the source of sin. An infinite regress is inescapable without a beginning point that can generate alternative responses. If sin can arise from another source besides

deformed being, there is no reason to propose the idea that deformed being causes sin. The inference is that only rational beings are moral ones.

The Relationship of Act and Nature

The second problem in Augustine's doctrine of evil is his attempt to discuss even moral evil primarily in reference to the category of nature. He did so in the sense that an action was judged to be evil in comparison to the action proceeding from undeteriorated nature, and deteriorated nature was judged to be deteriorated in terms of its undeteriorated state. This problem is a particular aspect of the previous one about the relationship of natural and moral evil.

Origin of evil

It might seem possible to conceive of sin as caused by a deteriorated condition, but it is not possible under that supposition to conceive of sin as originating from an undeteriorated condition. The inadequacy of Augustine's analysis shows up in his inability to make a positive statement about the origin of sin. Sin can come from other than deterioration, or it could not get started.

Criterion of evil

A second inadequacy lies in the possibility of positive commandment. Positive commandments do not arise from the nature of mankind, the nature of the situation, or the nature of the purpose involved. They are not always right or wrong. Augustine recognized this category under the term "temporal law," but he did not seem to see that the very possibility of such a concept undermines the nature-act composite on which his criterion of evil depended. His ethical theory therefore is as inadequate as his doctrine of evil as privation.

In scripture, sin is not a nature or a deformed form of a nature. Sin is a disobedience; that is, sin is an action that does not conform to a standard for action, "*Everyone that does sin does lawlessness; sin is lawlessness*" (1 John 3:4; cp. 3:7; 5:17). Augustine agreed, of course, but the problem came afterwards in his identification of the standard. He put that standard in the nature God created rather than in the purpose of God in creation. His tacit assumption was that there is a one-to-one correspondence between nature and act, or else there is no point to his construct of lack of form in nature as the nature and cause of evil.

Instead of viewing the standard as the eternal law of form, the standard is always purpose, which is a personal matter. Even impersonal things are to be evaluated on this basis. "*One man's meat is another man's poison*" is a common saying. One farmer needs rain; the next

one has hay down. If it rains, it is both good and bad relative to each farmer's purpose. An instrument is said to be good in terms of its fitness for what someone purposes to use it. God pronounced his creation good in its original condition. The ultimate standard for good, therefore, cannot be the original form of nature. In that case, God would have no basis on which to evaluate the original nature itself. God called his creation good because it corresponded well with his purpose for it. Ultimately then good is not nature but action relative to purpose.

Out of person comes purpose.

Out of the nature of God comes the purpose of God.

Out of the purpose of God comes the creation by God, of which we are a part.

Out of our nature come our actions measured by the commandments of God that make his purposes known to us.

Each prior step delimits the succeeding one, but it does not positively and absolutely determine. The nature of God sets a limit on what kinds of things he purposes, but it does not specify them "from zero up," so to speak. The nature of creation establishes at least a loose fit for action by that creation. Impersonal nature operates deterministically to a great extent, but the greater variability in our nature makes it less evident how we should act as part of God's creation. Our nature has potentials broader than the will of God for using it. Wider variation exists in us because of the rational capacity that enables creativity. Our nature is such that it can fulfill God's purpose in creating us, but that does not require us to have a definite form of nature; and, if not, innate ethic is not always sufficient for measuring behavior. Created nature is not the ultimate criterion for sin.⁶

While there is sin against nature, not all sin is such. Augustine needed to back up his criterion of sin one step from nature to the purpose of the Creator of nature. That allows for values more restrictive than the nature mankind acts with. (1) Moral commandment designates commandments positively required by God's purpose. Since personal human nature was also made with reference to those same purposes, moral commandments tend to correlate with what is best for man's physical, psychological, and interpersonal nature. However, since God's purpose for man can be more restrictive than what man's nature may allow, some moral commandments may reference directly to divine purpose in an area where God's purpose has no corresponding element in created human nature.

(2) Positive commandment means commandment more specific than what purpose determines. Since nature is even broader than purpose, it is obvious that commandments more restrictive than purpose are also more restrictive than the creature's natural capacity. Since positive commandment generally and moral law in some respects are more explicit than the created nature, the creature can do something outside of God's will without having a defect in his own nature.

(3) Relative happiness provides another way of having sin without defect in nature. Man has a high degree of variability. Human variability does not equal human defect. God created man with whatever variability man has; hence, that variability is not in itself evil. As a result, there can be degrees to which behavior runs contrary to human nature. Many sins correlate with the fleshly appetites, which can be gratified in ways that bring immediate pleasure but not long-term joy. Ignorance may originate sin before we realize the negative effects our actions will have. Sometimes we do not know the better possibilities God designed us to live by in order to have life more abundantly (John 10:10). Often, we just do not stop and think.

Social existence brings influences contrary to good. The original sin-event among mankind introduced sin in this very way: Satan represented a contrary social influence. It did not take defect to create sin, so it does not take defect to continue it. In his social existence each person re-enacts the Garden Fall. Adam ends up being typical man as well as original man.

Lastly, we may simply settle for less than the ideal, especially when social influence introduces and reinforces our behavior. All these variations that occur by way of ignorance, physical appetites, and social influences reflect the differing degrees to which behavior fits nature before defect could explain sin. Less adequate fit between action and nature does not involve defect of nature. While there is sin against ontic nature, not all sin is such.

The origin of evil and sin can be accounted for without appealing to deformity—something not even theoretically possible under Augustine’s construction. An act contrary to positive commandment makes us just as surely sinners as does an act contrary to our nature. The disobedience by which the whole human race plunged into sin according to Augustine was just such a commandment. The Edenic prohibition indicates the establishment of a morality matrix, because if alternatives do not exist, morality does not exist. That would be determinism. The morality matrix can be established by any test command.

Cause of evil

Augustine’s thinking about good and evil issued from a misreading—or at least and unnecessary reading—of the Genesis statement that all God’s creation was good (Genesis 1:31). Taking this statement in a nature sense, Augustine began with the supposition that all created nature was originally good. These words, however, are spoken of the universe functionally more than naturally. It is viewed as operationally able to fulfill the end God had intended in making it.

(1) Nature, (2) action, and (3) relationship are three interrelated elements that constitute reality. The concept of good and evil, whether natural or moral, does not come in till action begins. An example of this point about moral evil occurs in James 3:8-10:

No one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil; it is full of deadly poison. We bless the Lord and Father with it and curse men with it who are made after the likeness of God. Blessing and cursing come out of the same mouth. Brothers, these things ought not be this way.

Strictly speaking, it is not the “mouth” (being) that is good or evil, but the functioning of it (blessing and cursing). The system does not become good or bad until it is plugged in, turned on, or started up. The nature of the statement in Genesis 2 corresponds to the looser statement at the beginning of the above quotation, “*the tongue is evil*”; but it is to be understood in the functional sense in the same way as the subsequent statement of James speaks of the tongue as functionally evil. An end is accomplished by action, and it is in terms of the degree to which a thing produces the intended end that we speak of it by a figure of speech as itself good or bad. So then, in a statement about good or bad the thing is being contemplated functionally in terms of an implicit standard of purpose. The flesh may be called evil, by which is meant experientially evil.

Summary and Conclusion

In the final analysis, while Augustine declared that evil was not a kind of nature, he did not succeed in discussing evil without reference to nature because he identified evil as a lack in the form of corruptible nature that produced sin. We sin now out of natural necessity by virtue of lacking what would enable us not to sin (anthropology). Since we lack that whereby we can respond to God, there are implications for how salvation works (soteriology), which in turn affects the concept of divine sovereignty (theology). Augustine never really solved the problem of evil because he never got away from the category of nature. He never got away from the category of nature because he assumed an absolute nature-act composite. Moral evil is not a substance (Manichaeism); neither is it a privation of form within substance (Augustine); sin is active disconformity to purpose.

The doctrine of natural depravity creates a dilemma between God’s desire to save all and his decision to save only some. Since God is consistent, he would save all if salvation were entirely up to him. Since he does not save everyone, there must be a variable in man that explains the difference between the all and the some. If we have inherited a fallen nature that cannot respond to him, that variable cannot reside in us. Therefore, we do not have a depraved nature. Taking ability out of our nature also removes from us the variable that could resolve the dilemma. Taking ability out of us amounts to putting the variable in God directly. Depravity in our nature cannot be overcome except by supernatural intervention, which introduces a requirement we cannot fulfill. God becomes the one who must fulfill that requirement by regenerating our nature. Therefore, God alone ends up choosing who is saved in keeping with the

fact that he alone chooses whom he regenerates. But since not everyone responds, evidently not everyone is regenerated. Ability to respond must exist in us in order to explain why not everyone does respond. Even as Augustine set aside Manichaeism because of its internal inconsistency, so also biblical theology must set aside Augustinianism because of its internal inconsistency.

End Notes

¹Cp. John 9; Acts 28:1-6.

²Genesis 3; 6:5ff.; 18:16-21; 38:7, 8-11; Exodus 32:21-35; Leviticus 10:1-7; Numbers 14, 16, 21; Acts 5:1-11; 12:20-23; 13:4-12

³Luke 13:1-5; 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

⁴See *De nuptiis et concupiscentiis*.

⁵For a fuller statement on the continuing causes of sin, see the author's book *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 42-47.

⁵Such was the contention, nevertheless, of Malebranche as cited by Gerald Bonner in *St. Augustine of Hippo*, p. 207; note *Confessiones* 7:13.

⁶Augustine's epistemology of "look within yourself" may be noted here also. See *Contra academicos* 3:31; *De ordine* 1:2.

⁷Ecclesiasticus 39:21 influenced his thinking in the same way, "*A man need not say, 'What is this? Why is that?' because he has created all things for their uses.*"