Is The Problem of Evil Even A Problem?

The problem of evil is an interesting one in theology. The idea goes that if god has absolute power, absolute awareness, and absolute goodness, where does evil come from? Saint Augustine claims to have a solution to this, rooted in free will. However, Saint Augustine’s solution is severely lacking in certain areas, and in this paper I shall attempt to illuminate these failures.

First, to expand on the theology of Saint Augustine and the problem of evil. The problem, as stated earlier, goes like this: If god is all powerful, all seeing, and all good, then how does evil come about? For if he is all powerful, it would be trivial for him to stamp out evil once he was aware of it. And if he is all seeing, he would always be aware of it. And if he is all good, he would be compelled to remove evil whenever possible. Saint Augustine’s solution comes in two parts. First, he argues that the free will that humans have is the root of all evil. However, god created humans and gave them free will, so in a sense the problem remains. So, he adds onto it. Evil, he claims, is not so much an existence as an absence. Evil is merely the absence of good. And from this he derives the conclusion that the universe was created good, as was man, and so evil comes about when man denies his creation and “ceases to be what [man was] meant to be, and stops doing what [man was] meant to be doing”.

Augustine’s first point holds solid. Evil, such as it is, can be tracked down to human will. And, if god exists and is perfect, he created man, and so he created human will, which in turn led to evil. And god, being all powerful and all knowing, would certainly have know this would be the case prior to the creation of man, “because God foreknew what was going to be in our will”. And the idea that evil is merely an absence of good is not objectionable either. The issue is that, supposing evil is the absence of good, the problem of evil remains unsolved. Even if evil is just an absence, if god is all powerful, he must have created absence and well as presence. To deny that god made absence is to deny that he is all powerful, and that his only domain is over that which exists. Which leads to a god that does not fulfill all of the criteria of Saint Augustine, because this god must either not be all powerful, or not be all good.

On the topic of good-ness, there is another part where Saint Augustine fails to solve the problem of evil. Or rather, he fails to accurately state the problem to begin with. One of Saint Augustine’s basic, unstated assumptions is that humans have infallible knowledge on the nature of good and evil, and so can tell whether god is all good or not. This leads to the point that perhaps the problem of evil is not such a problem at all. Perhaps god is all good, and humans just have clouded judgement on the nature of good and evil. This is not difficult to see in practice. Many times, people who are doing something that others would consider “evil” consider their actions justified. This would explain the existence of evil. Evil could easily be explained to be a lack of understanding of god’s goodness.

Saint Augustine’s solution to the problem of evil is lacking in two ways. First, it fails to accurately solve the problem of evil as he states it himself. Secondly, he makes basic assumptions as to the nature of human understanding on the nature of good and evil without explicitly stating the reason for his assumptions, and without even stating the assumptions themselves. Because of these two oversights, Saint Augustine’s solution to the problem of evil, which might not even be a problem at all, is nothing more than an entertaining thought experiment.