
UNIT 2 AUGUSTINE

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we deal the philosophical positions of St. Augustine in whom the Patristic Philosophy culminates. Hence, we explain Augustinian conversion, his theory of knowledge, theory of god, ethics, evil and history.

By the end of this Unit you should be able to:

- Relate faith and reason;
- Understand the final end of man;
- Find a solution to the problem of evil; and
- Comprehend the Christian philosophy of history.

2.1 PORTRAIT OF THE PHILOSOPHER

He was born in the small city of Tagaste in Roman Africa (today's Souk-Ahras in eastern Algeria) on Nov. 13, 354 A.D. His father, Patricius, was a pagan and his mother, Monica, was a Christian. He is an African by descent but Roman in culture and language. Augustine was brought up as a Christian but was not baptized as a

child. His early education was in his native city and then in the nearby city of Madaura. Later he was sent to Carthage to study rhetoric. Carthage was a metropolitan center and there Augustine got acquainted with the many intellectual currents of that time. He abandoned Christian teachings as illogical and became a Manichaean. According to Mani (Manes), the founder of Manichaeism, world is governed by two principles: of light and darkness or of good and evil. Augustine accepted it as an answer to the problem of evil. While in Carthage he became the father of a son (Adeodatus) from a mistress. He settled in Carthage and opened a school of rhetoric.

Gradually he began to feel the insufficiency of Manichaeism. In 383 we find him in Rome and then in Milan. In 389 he became professor of rhetoric in Milan. During this time he came under the influence of skepticism. In Milan he heard the sermons of St. Ambrose and began reading Neo-Platonic writings, especially the *Enneads* of Plotinus. "Augustine took over the philosophy of Plotinus. No other philosopher had so great an influence on him. He seldom mentions Aristotle. He had no knowledge of Plato, whom he identified with Plotinus." These studies taught him that true reality is spiritual and not material as the Manichaeans taught. Later, he will speak of the teachings of the Platonists as preparing his way to Christianity.

Though he admired the Neo-Platonists, their doctrines did not satisfy his spiritual quest. The reading of *The Sacred Scripture*, especially the Letters of St. Paul, made him convinced that it is not philosophy, but only the grace of God that can provide salvation for fallen man. Augustine's spiritual crisis came to a culmination when resting under a tree in the garden of his house at Milan, praying for divine help, he heard a child voice: *tolle et legge* (take up and read). He opened *The Holy Bible* and got Rom. 13, 12-14. He was filled "with a light of certainty, and all shadow of doubt disappeared". (*Confessions*, 8:12) He decided to become a Christian. The consciousness of a direct encounter with God transformed the very heart of his existence, all his impulses and aims. The conversion brought him the certainty of standing on solid ground. On Holy Saturday of 386 St. Ambrose baptized him.

On the way back to Africa, his mother died at Ostia. In 387 he reached Tagaste. There he founded a religious community with friends. In 391 he was ordained. In 395 he became an auxiliary bishop. The controversy over his sincerity, which emerged at this time, may have been a deciding factor in his writing the *Confessions* (397-401): a prose-poem of penitence for his past and of praise for God's loving providence. The book remains as one of the boldest and most frank investigation of the self in western literature. In 396 he became bishop of Hippo (present day Bône/Annaba in Algeria). He died in 430. He is known as *doctor gratiae* (doctor of grace).

2.2 MAIN WORKS

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| 1. Attack on Academic Sceptics | 2. On the Immortality of the Soul |
| 3. On the Teacher | 4. Confessions |
| 5. On the Trinity | 6. The City of God |

2.3 AUGUSTINIAN CONVERSION

Augustine underwent two conversions: *intellectual* (philosophical) and *volitional* (moral). His intellect was turned away from the material world toward the spiritual

world that had been hidden from him during his Manichaean period. Neo-Platonic philosophy was the chief agency in bringing about this development. Reading has played the major role in this conversion or to put it directly, it was a conversion through books. On reading Cicero's *Hortensius*, he was enthralled by the ideal of wisdom. It was this book that changed his interests and gave his life a new direction and purpose: the search for wisdom. In this book happiness was linked to the quest for wisdom, which is life according to what is highest in man, the mind. This book enkindled in Augustine a burning desire for truth and made him feel that all his worldly ambitions were misplaced. *The Bible*, the book of books, was the final tool of his conversion. Secondly, his will was converted from its desire for worldly honours, wealth and sense pleasures to the love of Christian virtues of chastity, poverty and detachment from the world.

2.4 AUGUSTINE: A PERSONAL THINKER

Philosophical systems have their genesis in human lives and individual perspectives. St. Augustine is a personal thinker. "I became a question to myself," he wrote. His only desire is to know God and the soul. "Let me know myself, let me know thee" (*Noverim me ut noverim te*). The vital products of Augustine's thinking never allow us to forget their source in his personal life, from which they spring forth like the blossom from its root and stem. His philosophical approaches are the results of his personal quest for wisdom and happiness. This personal quality in his speculation gives it a universal appeal.

2.5 RELATION BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON

Believing is *to think with consent* (*cum assensione cogitare*). It is an assent to something without full rational clarity. The function of faith in Augustine's philosophy is simply to serve as a beginning, to put one's feet on the right way in the quest for understanding.

Faith is always the necessary prerequisite for correct understanding. *Credo ut intelligam* – I believe that I may understand. Faith is the starting-point of all growth in understanding and the gateway to truth: "Understanding is the reward of faith. Seek therefore not to understand in order that you may believe, but to believe in order that you may understand". (It is based on Is.7,9). Augustine was fond of writing *intellige ut credas* (you must understand in order to believe). He was also fond of writing the antithesis *crede ut intelligas* (you must believe in order to understand). Faith seeks; understanding finds (*fides quaerit, intellectus invenit*). A being that cannot think can also not believe. Therefore, love reason (*intellectum valde ama*). Reason is in faith, faith in reason. They are not two sources that meet at some point.

Thus, faith for Augustine is superior to reason in the sense that without faith, reason is powerless to attain its object, happiness. But it is also inferior to reason in so much as faith is a blind assent, whereas rational understanding is a kind of vision, an intellectual insight. Hence, to remain content with *mere* faith would amount to decisive mutilation of human rationality. "It is now my conviction that what I want most is to grasp the truth, not by belief alone but also by understanding."

Faith requires the work of understanding. Philosophy plays an important part in the attempt to achieve deeper insight into the content of faith. It belongs to our intellectual

ability to try to penetrate into the truth revealed by God. *Fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) is the spirit of Augustinianism. Understanding is for the mind what seeing is for the senses; it is intellectual sight. "Thinking is a way, but only one way, by which to confirm and elucidate what faith has already made certainty."

2.6 THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Augustinian theory of knowledge has the specific purpose of identifying the path that will lead man to happiness. "Man has no reason for philosophizing except in order to attain happiness". (*City of God*, 19,1) This does not mean that what is true is what makes one happy but rather that knowledge of truth will make one happy. Only the wise man can be happy and wisdom postulates knowledge of truth. All men desire happiness. He defines happiness as *gaudium de veritate* (joy of truth). The problem of happiness amounts to this: to know what one should desire in order to be happy, and to know how to obtain it.

AGAINST SCEPTICS

Augustine's first epistemological objective was to destroy the sceptical assertion that true knowledge is impossible. Defending the knowability of truth, Augustine is defending the attainability of happiness. If wisdom implies happiness and happiness implies God, the sceptic can possess neither God, nor happiness, nor wisdom. In Augustine we find a relentless fight against scepticism and relativism in all their forms. Augustine points to a range of facts, the truthness of which even the sceptics cannot deny.

We know the law of non-contradiction: if something is true, its opposite cannot be true at the same time and in the same respect. P cannot be both true and false at the same time and in the same respect. Augustine states that dialectical (logical) truths are propositions of which we have absolute certainty. As examples he mentions various propositions of the forms, "not (p and not-p)", "p or not-p". Mathematical truths also have this highest degree of certainty. That $3+3=6$ is a necessary truth of which we are absolutely certain; that the sum of the angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles, too, is a necessary truth of which we are absolutely certain.

I know that I exist. My existence is undoubtable. I exist, even if I err (*Si fallor, sum*). This refutation is found in *On Free Will* (ii.3.vii) and in *The City of God* (xi.26). He writes in the *City of God*: "...I am certain that I am, that I know that I am, and that I love to be and to know. In the face of these truths, the quibbles of the sceptics lose their force. If they say; 'what if you are mistaken?' – well, if I am mistaken, I am. For, if one does not exist, he can by no means be mistaken. Therefore, I am, if I am mistaken. ... For, just as I know that I am, I also know that I know. And when I love both to be and to know, then I add to the things I know a third and equally important knowledge, the fact that I love."

LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE

Augustine speaks of three levels of knowledge. The *lowest level* is that of sense-knowledge, dependent on sensation. He regards sensation as *an act of the soul using the senses as its instruments*. The *highest level* of knowledge is the contemplation of eternal objects by the mind alone without the intervention of sensation. There is a *middle level* of knowledge where the mind judges corporeal objects according to eternal standards. This is the *rational level* of knowledge.

SENSE KNOWLEDGE

Augustine does not accept sense objects as suitable objects of true knowledge. But, he does not dismiss the senses and sense objects as fully deceptive. It is a fact that we sometimes err in our sense based judgements. That does not mean that our senses cannot be sources of true knowledge. It is one thing to admit the possibility of error in sense knowledge and another to refuse to give any credence to the senses.

This Augustinian epistemological outlook is Platonic in character. There is the same Platonic depreciation of sense-objects in comparison with eternal and immaterial realities and the almost reluctant acceptance of sense knowledge as a practical necessity of life.

KNOWLEDGE OF ETERNAL TRUTHS

How eternal truths and our knowledge of eternal truths are to be accounted for? The world of the senses does not provide us with eternal truths. The human mind, which is temporal and mutable is incapable of providing it either. Augustine agrees with Plato that just as finite truths are truths about finite objects of the sensible world, so also eternal truths are truths about eternal and immutable objects. These eternal objects are independent of the world of senses and of the human mind. Augustine identifies such objects, referred to by Plato as forms, as *ideas in the eternal, immutable mind of God*. They are the contents of the divine mind.

How eternal truths are accessible to the human mind? Reason alone is not enough to account for our knowledge of eternal truths. The human mind, in seeking eternal truths, is seeking something beyond its natural reach. Hence, there is the need of an extraordinary help. Such help comes to man from God himself in the form of *divine illumination*. Here, Augustine's philosophy is becoming *trans-philosophical*. The ideas in the mind of God are not known through reminiscence.

Augustine presents knowledge as *a form of seeing*. Just as the senses see material objects when the sun illumines them, so also human intellect *sees* eternal truths when illumined by the divine light. "The nature of the intellectual mind is structured in such a way that it sees the things which belong to the intelligible order according to the natural design disposed by the Creator; it sees them in an immaterial light of its own mind, as the corporeal eye sees in corporeal light the objects that surround it." (*De Trinitate*, Bk XII, ch.15, no.24).

2.7 PHILOSOPHY OF GOD

In his attempt to prove the existence of God, it was the dynamic tendency of the human soul towards God that interested him. The construction of philosophical arguments leading to theoretical conclusion was not his intention. He who possesses God possesses happiness. Desire for God is the only path that leads to happiness.

Augustine bases his theory of God on the argument derived from the immutability and permanence of the object of our intellectual knowledge. Man seeks the truth and strives for the good. Nothing is absolutely true or good except in so far as it participates in the absolute truth and goodness of Him who never changes. The existence of God is, therefore, the essential condition of intellectual and moral life.

God's existence can be affirmed from His creation. In *The City of God* he asserts:

“The very order, disposition, beauty, change and motion of the world and of all visible things silently proclaim that it could only have been made by God, the ineffably and invisibly great and the ineffably and invisibly beautiful”. (11,4,2)

Augustine gives also the argument from universal consent (*consensus gentium*): “Such is the power of the true Godhead that it cannot be altogether and utterly hidden from the rational creature, once it makes use of its reason. For, with the exception of a few, in whom nature is excessively depraved, the whole human race confesses God to be the author of the world”.

Even if a man thinks that a plurality of gods exist, he still would attempt to conceive ‘the one God of gods’, as ‘something than which nothing more excellent or more sublime exist. All concur in believing God to be that which excels in dignity all other objects’. It was these words that inspired St. Anselm to formulate his *ontological argument*.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) Explain the relation between faith and reason according to Augustine.

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2) Write a short note on Augustine’s theory of knowledge.....

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3) How does Augustine understand God?

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2.8 PHILOSOPHY OF THE WORLD

True to the general tenet of his philosophy, Augustinian theory of the world seeks to highlight those features that reveal nature’s relation to and dependence on God. He speaks of the creation of the world out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) by God’s free act. As created by God all things owe their being to God.

His interpretation of nothingness is in the following manner. Suppose that things are made out of some formless matter. Would not this formless matter be independent

of God? First of all, says Augustine, are you speaking of a matter, which is absolutely formless, or of a matter, which is formless only in comparison with the completely formed? If the former, then you are speaking of what is equivalent to nothingness. If you are speaking of the latter, then such matter is not altogether nothing but has something.

THEORY OF SEMINAL REASONS (*Rationes Seminales*)

In his theory of the world Augustine develops the theory of *seminal reasons*. They are formative principles implanted in matter by God at creation, like seeds. Seminal reasons are invisible having the potentiality to receive form according to the divine plan. This is the basis for Augustinian theory of exemplarism. Plato had spoken of ideas as exemplars of every existent in the world. Augustine has placed the ideas in the mind of God. Everything develops according to the ideas in the mind of God.

Augustine formulated the theory of seminal reasons in order to overcome an exegetic problem. According to the book of Genesis, God created the world in six days. In the book of Ecclesiasticus, it is said: "God created all things together" (18,1). Augustinian solution was to say that God created all things together in the beginning, but he did not create them all in the same condition. God created many things invisibly in germs, in their seminal reasons.

THEORY OF NUMBERS

Augustine made use of the Platonic number theme that goes back to Pythagoras, to speak about the world. He looks on number as the principle of order and form, of beauty and perfection. The world is arranged according to number, which is the basis for the intelligibility of the natural order. This mathematical understanding of the world became one of the characteristic features of Augustinianism.

The ideas are the *eternal numbers* while bodies are *temporal numbers*, which unfold themselves in time. Bodies can be considered as numbers in various ways, as being wholes consisting of a number of ordered and related parts, as unfolding themselves in successive stages. The plant, for example, germinates, breaks into leaves, and produces flower and fruit and seminate. The seminal reasons are *hidden numbers*, whereas bodies are *manifest numbers*.

2.9 ETHICS

Augustinian ethics has a Greek colour. Following the Greek tradition Augustine proposes happiness as the end of human conduct. Hence, Augustinian ethics is called *eudaimonistic*.

Happiness is to be found in the attainment and possession of the eternal and immutable object, God. This happiness is not the result of a theoretic contemplation of God, but a loving union with God. In Augustine's thought there is no separation between natural and supernatural ethics because he deals with the natural man and the natural man has a supernatural vocation.

The will is free and the free will is subject to moral obligation. The Greek philosophers had the conception of happiness as the end of conduct, but had no clear conception of obligation. With his clear notion of God and of divine creation Augustine was able to give moral obligation a firmer metaphysical basis than the Greeks. The necessary basis of obligation is freedom. Free will is a gift of God to man. It is the capacity to

know, to choose and to act freely according to our own lights. Free will is not an absolute good, but an intermediate good: its nature is good, but its effect can be good or bad according to the way man uses it.

Just as the human mind perceives eternal truths in the light of God, in the same manner it perceives in the same light practical truths or principles that should direct the free will. Just as God has made the mind a receiver of *intellectual illumination*, he has made the will the receiver of *moral illumination*, through the intellectual illumination of the mind. Just as the light of truth is present in the mind, so too the law of God is written in the human heart or conscience. Man is by nature set towards God. He can fulfil the dynamism of that nature only by observing the moral laws that reflect the eternal law of God.

EVIL

Augustinian solution to the problem of evil is centered on the negative nature of evil. Evil is not something positive in the sense of created by God. Evil is the absence or privation of goodness. Evil is the distortion of something that is inherently good. The evil of blindness consists in the lack of a proper functioning of the eye. Darkness is the absence of light. (*Confessions*, 3:7; 7:3,5,12)

How evil originated? Evil came about initially in those levels of the universe that involved free will - the levels of angels and humans. Some of the angels rebelled against the creator. They in turn tempted the first man and woman to fall. Moral evil is due to this fall. Natural evil is the penal consequences of sin. "All evil is either sin or the punishment of the sin." "God is not the parent of evils ... Evils exist by the voluntary sin of the soul to which God gave free choice. If one does not sin by will, one does not sin."

How is it that man does evil? Augustine answers: because he turns away from education. He turns away from moral knowledge, from the opportunity to acquire it. Without free will there can be no goodness, no right action. It is not logically possible for God to have given man free will and at the same time to have prevented him from sinning, from doing evil. For, to do that is to take away with one hand what he gives with the other. In the world of bodies, there are many things which we can put to bad use, but this is no reason for saying that they are evil and that God should not have given them to us, because, considered in themselves, they are good.

2.10 PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

In 410 Goths conquered Rome. The pagans attributed the disaster to the abandonment of the ancient gods. So long as Jupiter was worshipped Rome remained powerful. Now the emperors have turned away from him and he no longer protects Romans. This pagan accusation called for an answer. The *City of God* was St. Augustine's answer. It was an immensely influential book throughout the middle ages, especially in the struggle of the Church with secular powers. With Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*, *City of God* is one of the foundational works in political philosophy.

Augustine was the first to develop a Christian philosophy of history. In his *City of God*, he tried to analyze the forces at work in human affairs. He saw the kingdom of God as the goal of all history. There are external and internal forces that move human history. The external force is the providential care of God for his creation.

The internal forces that drive history are the desires and the loves of the individuals who make it up. Augustine is a “theological interpreter of history; he is not primarily interested in the development of humankind, but in God’s plan.”

The human race can be divided into two camps - that of those who love God and prefer God to self and that of those who prefer self to God. He sees the history of the human race as the history of the dialectic of these two camps, the one in forming the *worldly state (civitas terrena)* and the other in forming the *divine state (civitas Dei)*. He calls city of world as city of Babylon and city of God as city of Jerusalem. Cain belongs to the city of the devil, Abel to the city of God. Abel was a pilgrim on earth and a citizen of heaven. The patriarchs belonged to the city of God. Those who are moving towards full citizenship in the city of God live life as pilgrims. This world is for them a place they must pass through in order to reach their true home in heaven. Those who reflect the values of the earthly city are perfectly happy making their home here.

Augustine’s philosophy of history is *linear*. The first humans had a chance to maintain their original innocence and once they failed there was no going back. The coming of Christ was also a historical event never to be repeated. In *City of God* 12.4 he calls the cyclical theories of history *a mockery of the truth*.

2.11 TIME

Augustine was driven to the question of time by the argument against the idea of creation: what did God do before he created heaven and earth? Such questions are meaningless. With the creation, God also created time. Time has a beginning. In eternity all is present. (*Confessions*, 11: 10,13,14)

Neither the past nor the future, but only the present really *is*. Nevertheless, there really is time past and future. We are led into contradictions here. To avoid these contradictions he says that past and future can only be thought as present. *Past* must be identified with *memory*, and *future* with *expectation*. Memory and expectation are both present facts. There are three times: “a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.” “The present of things past is memory; the present of things present is sight; and the present of things future is expectation.” (*Confessions*, 11:20; 11:18). Time is subjective. Time is in the human mind, which expects, considers and remembers (*Confessions*, 11:28). It follows that there can be no time without a created being (*Confessions*, 11:30).

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Write a short note on the ethics of Augustine.

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2) What is Augustine's understanding of evil

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3) Explain the Christian philosophy of history.

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2.12 LET US SUM UP

Augustine synthesized the best elements of pagan philosophy, especially those from Plato, into a system of Christian thought. He is generally acclaimed as the *Plato of Christianity*. His was a mind almost superhuman in its transcendent power of synthesis. He is to be remembered as the philosopher of interiority. His single-minded quest for truth is a model for all thinkers. His arguments against the sceptics are very formidable. His epistemological theory of illumination has exerted enviable influence on Christian thinkers. Augustine did give sufficient attention to the reality of evil. His position that natural evil is the punishment for moral evil is rather unacceptable. Even before the arrival of man on earth there have been natural evils. Augustinian interpretation of history is extremely one sided. There is a strong tenet of dualism present in the *City of God*. If we look at it in the present day perspective there is a lack of openness to non-Christians.

2.13 KEY WORDS

- Belief** : Belief is the firm assent of the mind to the knowledge / truth claims of another.
- Understanding** : Understanding is the superior power of discernment / enlightened intelligence.

2.14 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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2.15 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Believing is to *think with consent*. It is an assent to something without full rational clarity. Faith is the starting-point of all growth in understanding and the gateway to truth. Seek therefore not to understand in order that you may believe, but to believe in order that you may understand”.

Thus, faith for Augustine is superior to reason in the sense that without faith, reason is powerless to attain its object, happiness. But it is also inferior to reason in so much as faith is a blind assent, whereas rational understanding is a kind of vision, an intellectual insight. Hence, to remain content with *mere* faith would amount to decisive mutilation of human rationality.

Faith requires the work of understanding. Philosophy plays an important part in the attempt to achieve deeper insight into the content of faith. It belongs to our intellectual ability to try to penetrate into the truth revealed by God.

- 2) Augustinian theory of knowledge has the specific purpose of identifying the path that will lead man to happiness. And the knowledge of truth alone will make one happy. Only the wise man can be happy and wisdom postulates knowledge of truth.

There are three levels of knowledge. The *lowest level* is that of sense-knowledge, dependent on sensation. He regards sensation as *an act of the soul using the senses as its instruments*. The *highest level* of knowledge is the contemplation of eternal objects by the mind alone without the intervention of sensation. There is a *middle level* of knowledge where the mind judges corporeal objects according to eternal standards. This is the *rational level* of knowledge.

- 3) Augustine bases his theory of God on the argument derived from the immutability and permanence of the object of our intellectual knowledge. Man seeks the truth and strives for the good. Nothing is absolutely true or good except in so far as it participates in the absolute truth and goodness of Him who never changes. The existence of God is, therefore, the essential condition of intellectual

and moral life. God's existence can be affirmed from His creation too. The very order, disposition, beauty, change and motion of the world and of all visible things silently proclaim that it could only have been made by God.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) Augustinian ethics has a Greek colour. Following the Greek tradition Augustine proposes happiness as the end of human conduct. Hence, Augustinian ethics is called *eudaimonistic*. Happiness is to be found in the attainment and possession of the eternal and immutable object, God. This happiness is not the result of a theoretic contemplation of God, but a loving union with God.

The will is free and the free will is subject to moral obligation. The necessary basis of obligation is freedom. Free will is a gift of God to man. It is the capacity to know, to choose and to act freely according to our own lights. Free will is not an absolute good, but an intermediate good: its nature is good, but its effect can be good or bad according to the way man uses it.

- 2) According to Augustine, evil is not something positive in the sense of created by God. Evil is the absence or privation of goodness. Evil is the distortion of something that is inherently good. Evil came about initially in the exercise of free will - the levels of angels and humans. Some of the angels rebelled against the creator. They in turn tempted the first man and woman to fall. Moral evil is due to this fall. Natural evil is the penal consequences of sin. "All evil is either sin or the punishment of the sin." "God is not the parent of evils ... Evils exist by the voluntary sin of the soul to which God gave free choice. If one does not sin by will, one does not sin."

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the human race as the history of the dialectic of these two camps, the one in forming the *worldly state* and the other in forming the *divine state*. He calls city of world as city of Babylon and city of God as city of Jerusalem. Those who are moving towards full citizenship in the city of God live life as pilgrims. This world is for them a place they must pass through in order to reach their true home in heaven. Those who reflect the values of the earthly city are perfectly happy making their home here.