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A Necessary Evil—
To Define Evil is to Define God

In this examination of the benevolent God and the existence of evil dilemma we will, perhaps from necessity, focus our attention not so much upon the enigma of God, but—in the belief that clarifying one might clarify both—upon the more accessible nature of evil.

Augustine begins his examination of evil by tackling the problem inherent in accepting that the *original* of "Original Sin" must function in its temporal as well as its religious sense.

> . . . in your sight no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth. (C. 27)[1]

The investigation into the state of babyhood does indeed reveal the presence of sin. It is significant though that often Augustine digresses into prayer, suggesting that he realised—perhaps unconsciously—that the evidence was somewhat tenuous and necessitated a rigid and narrow definition of sin. Indeed, it

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[1]Quotation references will conform to the following: C.—Augustine, *Confessions*; G.—Paul Davies, *God & the New Physics*;

seems strange to suggest that a baby's cries for milk are sinful and that the only reason we do not rebuke him is that the scolding will not be understood. Even the reasoning is peculiar: Because crying for food it is an action we generally discard as we grow—and as a general rule men do not willingly discard that which is good—then it must be an evil thing even in a baby.

Of course, the first problem is that Augustine equates crying baby with crying adult, instead of crying baby with talking adult. In this respect, *asking* for food is certainly not wrought with evil. But the main problem is that Augustine here places the focus entirely on the *action* itself, though it seems manifestly obvious that actions need not, in themselves, be either good or evil. There is an essential contextual factor that must be considered. We would certainly all agree that stealing is evil, particularly when it produces unhappiness or calamity. But when we steal the tools of evil from an evil doer intent on using them for evil? Lying is always wrong. Or is it? If we lie to save life? Murder is always evil. Or is it? If we murder one and thereby save two—or two million? When we examine not simply the act but the context in which it was acted, a new factor begins to be realised: the intent or motive. What becomes clear is that it is not so much the act that is good or evil, as Augustine here suggests, but the *intent* of the person doing the action. To judge an act without reference to its context then is to commit a sin in judging sin.

We can hardly fail to notice that Augustine, by relying upon this simplistic definition of evil, which does not take into

account the subtleties of context and intent, has argued himself into a corner when he suggests:

> It was, then, simply because they are *small*[2] that you used children to symbolise humility when, as our King, you commended it by saying that *the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these*. (C. 40)

Even if we accept the fact of original sin, it seems much safer—and a good deal more accurate—to suppose that it lies dormant in the early stages of babyhood and that the manifestation of its presence is conjunctive with the development of autonomy. This, at least, corresponds with empirical evidence; furthermore, this would imply that young children are less sinful than old children, than adults, offering a more credulous explanation to "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

We have seen, then, that the capacity to commit evil seems innate and is tied in some way to our autonomy of action and perhaps self-awareness; and that it lies not so much in action as intent. But what is the source of evil?

In reference to St. Thomas Aquinas' teleological argument—last of his "Five Ways"—we find that things of the natural world that lack knowledge are moved towards an end. Since knowledge is relative, and especially since compared to an omniscient being we are clearly lacking, it is fair to conclude that we, lacking

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[2]My italics.

knowledge, are moved by God towards good.[3] If this is the case, it seems just as likely that, since we are clearly also moved in the opposite direction—towards sin, it must be by a body opposite in nature to the character of God.

We have, of course, entered the philosophical spirit of Manichaeism, which avoids the good and evil paradox by seeing them not caused by a single benevolent God but as being co-eternal. The dualism it incorporates seems to manifest a certain authenticity that has resulted in a continuous influence even to this day.

Perhaps some of this authenticity is derived from the closeness with which it corresponds with our inner selves. Daily we struggle with doing right and doing wrong, as if the mind itself is divided between good and evil, with each force competing for our acquiescence. Quite simply, this is the way we find ourselves. It is perhaps natural then that we extend the micro state into the macro.

When the entire Manichaean system is examined, however, we see, above all else, a lack of simplicity that the laws of longevity cannot tolerate. The Manichaean cosmogonic myth, for example, is necessarily complex, attempting, as it does, to incorporate Buddhism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, whilst simultaneously serving as the basis for a system of ethics. It also authors the unusual problem of giving the first move, thus

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[3]Admittedly, we have replaced the forces of physicality with forces of morality, but logically the assumption still seems sound.

the initiative, to the power of darkness.

Augustine's reason for rejecting Manichaeism is masked in the logic of Nebridius' argument, which concludes:

> . . . —if they admitted that you were incorruptible, all their theories were proved to be false and repugnant. If they said that you were corruptible, it would be an obvious falsehood, no sooner uttered than rejected in horror.(C.135)

Of course, the argument is fatally flawed: Augustine uses the God of the Christian system to disprove an alternate system in which He has no placed. The foundation of the argument rests upon God's incorruptibility, His omnipotence. This though is the God of Augustine and not that of Mani. Indeed, according to the Manichaean myth, the first battle between light and darkness saw darkness triumphant. The weakness of God in the Manichaean system is not a weakness of the system itself, but an essential part of it.

We should not then be fooled by the argument of Nebridius. It points not to the nullification of Manichaean dualism, but rather to a people—Christian contemporaries of Augustine—so overwhelmed by the character of the Christian God that they could conceive of no other.

Of course, it was not simply Manichaean dualism that Augustine rejected, but the entire system of belief. But in rejecting an unwieldy system for Christianity, its most commendable attribute—the explanation for the existence of evil—is also

rejected. [4]

Once Augustine frees himself from the shackles of the temporal original sin, putting babes back in the sensible arms of their mothers, he begins to examine sin in earnest.

Augustine solves the problem of evil—from within the limits of a Christian God who is all good and only good—by suggesting, quite simply, that there is no such *thing* as evil.

A catalogue of pleasures based upon things physical—the attractiveness of precious metal—as well as things metaphysical—friendship—is offered as the source of possible sin. Augustine explains:

> All these things and their like [the catalogue] can be can be occasions of sin because, good though they are, they are of the lowest order of good . . . (C.48)

Desire and ambition, for example, might divert us from desire and ambition regarding God, and though they might be focused upon something good, or of themselves be good, the ultimate good lies only in God.

The hierarchy of lower good might be defined then as containing *all* worldly things and feelings whose goal is not wholly spiritual.

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[4]Of course, the tidiness, the simplicity that Manichean duality provides has not been entirely cast aside of Christianity, which uses the Devil, at least for purposes of rhetoric, as the personification of evil.

But there seems a slight contradiction at work. On the one hand we have the idea that worldly things and feelings are all *essentially* good, yet Augustine, whilst promoting this idea, seems intent to distance himself as much as possible from that world. The question is, does Augustine's almost obsessive asceticism undermine, to some degree, his concept of universal goodness of God's physical creation? Indeed, we are forced to wonder why such a thing as sensory pleasure exists when we learn:

> But my sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in him but in myself and his other creatures.(C. 40)

Why then is there pleasure, beauty and truth in mortal men? Are we to assume that pleasures of the flesh are a bad gift? How can this be? If we extend the idea to material things as well as "other creatures," is it a sin then to look for pleasure in good food because the good is of a lower order? Or are we perhaps not to think of food as being good in its own right, but by grace of God? And similarly with all other good things of the material world. Are we not to enjoy an apple because it is tasty, pleasantly scented, nicely red and ripe, agreeable to the touch, crisp and crunchy; but because God made it possible? This surely requires detachment inconsistent with the subject, which is things material. How can we detach ourselves from things we taste and smell, see and touch and hear? They attach *themselves* to *us*.

Augustine carries the idea of degrees of goodness a step

further, and finally begins to include the importance of intent or motive. A crime, which at first glance might seems evil in itself, becomes something quite different when we take note of the motive. Augustine suggests that the motive will always stem from the desire to gain, or fear of loosing, a lower good.

 Not only crime, but vice is pulled from its old dark domain. Those who suffer pride, ambition, cruelty, lust, inquisitiveness, ignorance masquerading as simplicity, sloth, extravagance, profligacy[5], covetousness, envy, anger, fear, or grief merely "copy you in a perverse way."(C.50) This difficult idea is explained by denoting the ultimate of all these vices to be aspects of God and thus good. In this manner; "The covetous want many possessions for themselves: you possess all."(C.50) Vice then might be seen as a corruption of God's qualities. Also:

> Ignorance too, and stupidity choose to go under the mask of simplicity and innocence, because you are simplicity itself and no innocence is greater than yours.(C.50)

It is the final sentence regarding innocence that Augustine introduces, fleetingly and for the first time, another important aspect of the source and nature of evil: "You are innocent even of the harm which overtakes the wicked, for it is the result of their own actions."(C.50)

 Evil then is a product of our own actions and choosing the

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[5]Augustine's "spendthrift."

lower order of good. In other words, our ability to choose the lower order of good allows for the creation of evil.

At last, Augustine's great pear robbery begins to make sense. The initial problem was its senselessness. The deed seemed motiveless. The act seemed evil. Evil seemed to be the thing desired. Evil therefore exists. Upon close examination, however, Augustine realises, though still with a certain vagueness and uncertainty, that the theft was carried out for the sake of "companionship," "a laugh" and "a little sport." These then seem to be the aspects of lower good.

It is therefore the *turning* to the lower good, rather than fixing our gaze upon the ultimate good, that is the evil. The turning, and thus the free will, allows for the possibility of evil. We can only admire Augustine's perspicacity in solving the paradox.

And yet doubts remain. Has Augustine simply hit upon a semantic resolution to the problem, saying that there is no evil, just different degrees of good?

Clearly we cannot now avoid the question of free will, since it is the axis upon which the whole theory spins. Necessity then demands that we examine, at least briefly, the nature of the deterministic universe.

If we eliminate all rhetoric, quite simply, the deterministic universe is one in which *the past determines the present as the present determines the future*. As far as the human being and free will are concerned, this translates to the realisation that

"free choice" does not exist in so much as we choose according to who we are, and that we did not make ourselves.

W. T. Stace, in his essay, "The Problem of Free Will," suggests that it is our sentience which somehow frees us from the universe of causality; that free acts find *their* cause in psychological states. This evidently sits well with Augustine's emphasis upon free will and personal responsibility. Unfortunately it avoids the question of the cause of those psychological states. Why should the mind, which we might define as our general character based upon what our individual brain is, be in anyway disconnected with the rest of the universe? Indeed, if it is—if we are—part and parcel of the natural universe, then logically we must be subject to its law of causality.

It might be suggested, in response, that the mind is not as defined; that there is something of the mind not tied into the physical universe. Perhaps mind is synonymous with soul. How, in this case, does the mind connect with our physical body if it is formed of spirit? Indeed, if it is my spirit mind that tells my physical finger to finger, there must be some material connection, lines of communication, between the two. As we see, it seems virtually impossible to separate ourselves from the universe of causality.

What then if the universe is not entirely causal. Paul Davies, in *God and the New Physics*, points to two main areas where the Newtonian universe, the entirely predictable universe, might prove erroneous.

> . . . discoveries of modern cosmology reveal that
> our universe should have an expanding horizon in
> space, and that every day new disturbances and
> influences cross into the universe from beyond the
> horizon. (P.D.137)

This though presents us with another paradox: it suggests that the universe is expanding *into* something, or at least that there are things beyond the limit of the universe. If the universe is defined as everything that physically exists, this clearly cannot be true. But even if we pass this problem aside, the question remains as to whether these disturbances, which have not previously been connected with the web of causality and so introduce incalculable factors, are able to exert any influence on causality at the human level. It seems likely that the chaos they introduce is so far removed in space time continuum, that it is effectively assimilated and becomes a part of causality before exerting any vaguely local influence.

The second area where absolute causality is disputed is in the quantum factor. Davies elucidates:

> Heisenburg's famous uncertainty principle assures
> us that there is always an irreducible indeterminism
> in the operation of sub-atomic systems. (P.D. 137)

The question in this case is not with remoteness but with smallness. Can chaos at the sub-atomic level have any effect at our level of existence? Even if the subatomic bits of an axe are busy doing a mad *patternless* dance, when it strikes the tree, the tree will fall.

We should not ignore the fact that the very idea of having no free choice seems, to some degree, ludicrous; but it is because the threads of causality are almost limitless that there seems almost limitless possibilities; thus it could easily be the illusion of free will which we experience—and not free will itself.

The question of God's omniscience now seems to appear. If God knows what we will choose before we choose, how objectively valid can that choice really be? Alternately, in a purely causal universe, where freedom is an inevitable illusion, an omniscient God would indeed see that web of cause and effect—and seeing it would understand not only what we do and will do, but why we do.

In tying together a world which seems to deny free choice with Augustine's great pear robbery, we find, interestinly, that in may respects the conclusions remain much the same. When Augustine "chose" to steal those pears, he chose the only choice he could. The choices were unlimited, but his capacity *was* limited. If we were somehow able to send him back in time without changing any of the original causes, which is to say he must go back with no knowledge of either the test or what he did the first time, all conditions being equal, Augustine would make the same "choice." Augustine, being Augustine, will act according to Augustine.

If we are truly prisoners in a deterministic universe of cause and effect, is that universe, by its very nature, void of evil? Is there is no place for blame? It seems more likely that it is *because* we act according to what the past has made us that blame

and admonishment are essential, for the blame and admonishment of today will be the cause of effect tomorrow. It is quite clear that Augustine was unable to do anything other than participate in the great pear robbery. It is more than possible that he might have avoided the act if additional factors had come in to play—a guiding hand, for example. When we admonish a pear thief for the misdeed, on the superficial level—blind as we are to the web of causality—it is because we place the blame firmly upon the culprit. At a more abstract level though, the admonishment is not due to the culpability of the thief, but because restraint points the finger of culpability at *ourselves*. This is because we understand intuitively, to risk repetition, that the blame and admonishment of today will be the cause of effect tomorrow. On both levels then, blame exists, either in a superficial accusation or in the *transfer* of blame. In a sense, the purely deterministic universe takes evil away from the individual and places it in the hands of all humanity, since all our potential actions, once realised, enter the web of causality and bring about new effects.

Augustine places the evil in *choosing* lower good. The deterministic universe, presented here, is in accord with Augustine's idea of evil existing not in its own right; but where he sees choice there is the illusion of choice; where he places the onus upon the individual, there is humanity bound by

causality to share both the blame and the guilt of sin.[6]

Despite the similarities between these conclusions and Augustine's, there is one aspect in which this particular deterministic system and Augustine's Christian one are at variance. The creator of the entirely causal universe is, unlike the benevolent God of Christianity, essentially amoral.

If we reject the dualism of Mani and the benevolent though partly impotent God; the subtleties of Augustine and the benevolent omnipotent God; the morality of Accountable Determinism—to coin a phrase—and the amoral Creator, there still remains one other possibility: Perhaps God embodies both good and evil.

> His gifts are good and the sum of them all is my
> own self. Therefore, the God who made me must be good
> . . . (C. 40)

This is clearly a fallacy of composition—even my meanest murdering uncle occasionally gave good gifts.

It is at the very least conceivable that good and evil can only exist by sanction of each other. If we take God to be a singularity, how can that singularity accommodate good alone, for it seems paradoxical to suggest that good can exist without its counterpart.

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[6]The purely causal universe presented, which insists upon culpability and resposibility and shuns the passivity of fatalism, is my own personal interpretation of what Determinism must be; and is not to be found reworded in text books—at least as far as I know.

In the final analysis, different system, different definitions of evil, different Gods do create.

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