

## Evil results from Free Will – Augustinian Theodicy

The argument here is that a world with humans and the evil that results from their free will is better than one without humans even if that world had no evil. War, murder, torture, etc. are worth the price of the positives that derive from human free will. Moreover, God cannot be held responsible for the evil which results. The key thinkers who have argued this include St Augustine (354-430) and St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).



St Augustine wrote extensively against the heresy (a belief opposed by the mainstream Church) of Manichees. A key belief in Manichaeism is that the powerful, though not omnipotent good power (God), was opposed by the eternal evil power (devil).

Augustine of Hippo bases his theodicy (defence) on a reading of key Biblical passages: Genesis 3 and Romans 5:12-20. Augustine's is an attempt to solve the evidential problem of the existence of evil: evil must have come from somewhere. Genesis 3 is the story of Adam and Eve and their 'Fall' in the Garden of Eden, whereby the snake convinces the woman to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil. The woman picks the fruit and passes some to Adam. Because of their disobedience God has them evicted from the garden with a curse: the woman will experience pain in childbirth and the man will lord it over the woman and have to till the ground to rid it of the unruly influence of nature (the weeds begin to grow).

“<sup>16</sup>To the woman God said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” <sup>17</sup>To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. <sup>18</sup>It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup>By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

Genesis 3:16-19

In Romans 5 Paul picks up this idea of humankind's fall away from God's grace and blessing and describes the Christian belief that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross redeems us from the effects of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. In his self-sacrifice Jesus has made available the gift of righteousness, taking the penalty for our disobedience on himself.

These are the main points of Augustine's theodicy:

- God is perfect. The world he created reflects that perfection.
- Humans were created with free will.
- Sin and death entered the world through Adam and Eve at the Fall in Genesis 3, and their disobedience in taking and eating the 'fruit of the knowledge of good and evil'.
- "Evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name evil" (Augustine, City of God).
- Adam and Eve's disobedience brought about 'disharmony' in both humanity and Creation.
- The whole of humanity experiences this disharmony because we were all 'seminally' present in the loins of Adam.
- Natural evil is consequence of this disharmony of nature brought about by the Fall.
- God is justified in not intervening because the suffering is a consequence of human action.

Notice that central to Augustine's theory is that of 'privation' – evil is not a substance in itself, but rather it is a deprivation or an absence of something. Augustine uses the analogy of blindness – blindness is not an entity but the absence of sight. For Augustine, evil came about as a direct result of the misuse of free will which made us in our own turn blind and weakens our ability to do active good without God's help. It's worth reading Augustine's words in full, where he explains that darkness is the privation of light, and that the divine artist has ordered everything, so by analogy, just as a great singer will pause and the pauses are designed to render the beauty of the song more complete. So, God does not create our vices, but orders, or perhaps we say, permits them to occur.

For Scripture did not say that God made the darkness. God made the forms, not privations that pertain to that nothing out of which all things were made by the divine artist. But we understand that he ordered these privations when it is said, "And God divided the light and the darkness," so that even these privations are not without their order, since God rules and governs all things.

Thus, when we sing, the moments of silence at certain and measured intervals, although they are privations of sounds, still are well ordered by those who know how to sing, and they contribute something to the sweetness of the whole melody. So too, shadows in a painting highlight certain things and are pleasing, not by their form, but by their order.

For God does not make our vices, but he still orders them when he puts sinners in that place and forces them to suffer what they deserve. This is what it means for the sheep to be placed on the right and the goats on the left.

Thus, he both makes and orders the very forms and natures, but he does not make, but only orders, the privations of forms and the defects of natures. Thus, he said, "Let there be light, and the light was made." 50 He did not say, "Let there be darkness, and darkness was made." One of these he made; the other he did not make.

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But he ordered both of them, when God divided the light and the darkness. Thus, since he is their maker, individual things are beautiful, and since he orders them, all things are beautiful. (Augustine, Against the Manichees, Book2, Chapter 5)

It's important to notice that all suffering is therefore a consequence of this abuse of free will. God is not responsible for these evils, as "God does not make our vices, but he still orders them when he puts sinners in that place and forces them to suffer what they deserve." According to Augustine, evil includes natural evil, such as earthquakes and famines, as well as moral evil which can be attributed directly to human beings. Natural evil has come about through an imbalance in nature brought about by the Fall. Humans are therefore responsible for both moral and natural evil.

Finally, God's everlasting love for the world is demonstrated through the reconciliation made possible through Jesus Christ.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." John 3:16-17

A modern advocate of Augustine's view can be found in Alvin Plantinga (God, Freedom and Evil, 1974) who claimed that for God to have created a being who could only have performed good actions would have been logically impossible. This view was later criticised by Anthony Flew and J. L. Mackie, who both argue that God could have chosen to create "good robots" who still possessed free-will.

## Criticism of Augustine's Theodicy



Augustine argues that the sin of Adam and Eve in choosing to eat the fruit of the garden resulted in a curse which is passed down through human reproduction to every human being.

Augustine held that there was a state of ignorant bliss in the Garden of Eden which was unbalanced by the Fall. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection gives a completely different account of human nature, which has evolved over millennia to exhibit both good characteristics (what Richard Dawkins calls 'the altruistic gene') and self-centred characteristics (what the Bible calls 'sin').

However, we might argue God can be held responsible for the system by which the natural world works, He should be held responsible for the suffering that his system causes. Augustine's theodicy puts all the blame on the first humans, Adam and Eve, and yet all suffer. We might ask: why should people suffer for the misdemeanours of past generations? Moreover, Augustine seems to fail to mention anything about God's omniscience – if God foreknew the Fall of humankind and also designed a consequence of suffering for both Adam and Eve, surely this continues to be a challenge to the idea of God's omnibenevolence (God's perfect love). What human being would decree permanent suffering for his or her children? Augustine also makes much of the idea of a literal hell – as part of Creation. Therefore, God must be directly responsible for creation, and therefore must have foreseen the need for punishment.

So, we can answer that free will is not worth all the misery that ensues from free choice, and surely the omniscient (all-seeing, all knowing) God would have foreseen this evil and stopped it happening. Why did an omnipotent God not create humans with the freedom to do bad things, but who never do them because our wills are always tuned to choose right?

Moreover, free will, if it even exists, only accounts for moral evil (evils attributed to free will like murder, rape, etc.) but not natural evil (earthquakes, floods, disease, etc) which have nothing to do with free will. Natural evil cannot be attributed to the event of the Fall of Adam and Eve, but rather to something faulty in the design of a world which surely a good designer would have avoided, a point David Hume notes in his attack on the teleological (design) argument for God's existence.