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An Exposition of Augustine's Theodicy: From its Influences to its Modern Application

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April 2, 2011

7th Annual New England Undergraduate Philosophy Conference

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This paper delineates the thrust of Augustine's theodicy against the broader background of his Christian Neoplatonic outlook. We examine Augustine's initial Manichaean influences and see how these beliefs carry over to his mature thought, which is evident in the seventh book of the *Confessions*. After Augustine's time with the Manicheans, we look at how he was so influenced by the books of the Platonists (*libri platoniorum*). Although Augustine's position regarding the problem of evil shifts, his idea of the primacy of the soul is still evident in his thought process. To wit, Augustine posits that evil must be considered a privation of the Good, so much so as to reach the point of complete nonentity. Human beings' ability to be corrupted by evil rests in their position as being created *ex-nihilo* by God. With this creation also comes an inherent mutability. Due to human mutability, Augustine believes that God is not responsible for such evil actions. This paper also contrasts this belief with modern empiricist David Hume's idea regarding God's responsibility for human actions. Hume argues that the volition of all human actions rests in God as the Creator of the world. As creator, Hume claims that God places human beings in a position to act. If humans are predisposed to perform evil actions, they cannot be faulted. Augustine would counter that argument by claiming that evil is not a substance. Not being a substance, evil is therefore not ascribable to God. Ultimately, Augustine's theodicy is based upon the goodness of God.

While the main focus of Augustine's *Confessions* is not to address one particular philosophical matter but to serve as a reflection on Augustine's life choices, the problem of evil pervades all philosophical issues discussed. Having lived a contemptuously licentious lifestyle in his youth, Augustine explicates a myriad of problems with humanity in his *Confessions*. In its most basic structure, the problem of evil is made up of three propositions, whereby if two are true, the third necessarily cannot be true. Logically structuring the argument, the first premise argues that if an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God exists then evil does not. The second premise states that evil does exist in the world. The conclusion, therefore, argues that an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God does not exist. In order to analyze this great paradox, Augustine first aims to determine the nature of evil. Through his determination that evil is not a substance, and therefore not ascribable to God, Augustine's theodicy is based upon the goodness of God.

In his work, *The Problem of Evil*, Michael Peterson argues that, "the problem of evil is really not just one problem but a cluster of interrelated arguments and issues. The interplay of these arguments and issues gives the ongoing debate over evil a certain structure and flow" (Peterson 2). Augustine's stance on the problem of evil does not focus on blaming God for allowing evil to exist, but rather praising God for making a wholly good world. Augustine writes of creation that, "all things, taken one by one, are good, and all things, taken together, are very good. For our God has made all things very good" (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). The fact that the created world is good allows Augustine to make the case that evil is not a created substance. This theodicy is quite different than that of the radical empiricist David Hume. For Hume, the problem of evil focuses on the cause of human actions. He questions whether human actions are truly free or whether God has some bearing on our actions. Whereas Augustine declares that,

“For you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you,” Hume would argue that we have no rest in God (*Confessions* I,I).

Augustine’s most mature thoughts in the *Confessions* regarding the problem of evil lie in the seventh book, most specifically in the twelfth chapter. He first explains the nature and corruptibility of humanity. Augustine claims that, “beings that suffer corruption are nevertheless good” (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). Although human beings are corruptible, they are not bad due to the fact that they come from God. Humans can neither be fully incorruptible, nor fully corruptible because of humanity’s subsistence in God. Augustine argues this idea by writing, “If they were supremely good, they would be incorruptible, and if they were not good at all, there would be nothing in them to be corrupted” (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). Corruptibility, itself, is rooted in a being’s finitude. In the same manner that Augustine describes the corruptibility of humans as a mean between two extremes (a very Aristotelian view for the Neoplatonist), he also describes the finitude of created being. He argues that humans are, “not altogether existent nor altogether non-existent: they are, because they are from you; they are not, since they are not what you are” (*Confessions* VII,11(17)). Ultimately, human beings are subsistent in God; for a human being could neither exist nor cease to exist without God. True existence, for Augustine, lies in that which is unchangeable, that is, incorruptible (*Confessions* VII,11(17)).

Returning to the role of corruptibility in the nature of human beings, Augustine’s next argument takes a more circuitous position. He holds the belief that, “corruption damages a thing, and it would not suffer damage unless its good were diminished” (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). Following the structure of that argument, the good of a thing would need to be diminished prior to allowing damage to occur from corruption. Although not visible at first sight, this claim further supports Augustine’s mid-rank theory of human beings. The mid-rank theory,

“presupposes a hierarchical understanding of reality, and the superiority of spiritual natures over corporeal ones” (*Creatio* 170). Joseph Torchia, in his *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of Saint Augustine*, makes the comparison of the value of impure gold versus the value of pure silver (*Creatio* 170). Although the gold is not in its most pure state, it is still more valuable than the lesser metal (silver). To liken this metaphor to a broader sense of creation, an impure human being is still greater than pure materiality. Although the materiality may be in its most pure sense, the impure human being still has qualities that the purest of material objects could never possess. Namely, human beings’ rational capabilities allow them to either turn to what is higher, that is, God, or be corrupted through the material world. In “Augustine on evil and original sin” William Mann argues that there is nothing capricious about Augustine’s, “claim that a rational spirit corrupted by an evil will is still better than an uncorrupted irrational spirit, and that any spirit, no matter how corrupted, is better than any uncorrupted body” (Mann 44). Augustine would say, though, that human beings “can only undergo corruption if they will to be corrupted through a voluntary disobedience to Divine law” (*Creatio* 170).

The good of a human being is diminished from the fact that humans are not fully good, for if they were fully good they would be incorruptible and therefore, on the same level as God. We know, however, that placing human beings on the same level as God is not possible because human beings are constantly experiencing corruption. Augustine argues that the good of human beings is not diminished completely, though, for if it were human beings would, “not exist at all” (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). For Augustine, as long as things exist, “they are good” (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). Here we face the problem of evil. By following the established framework, if evil exists, it is good. But inherently the name “evil” implies the antithesis of what is good. Augustine bypasses this problem by asserting that evil is not a substance. He provides two

reasons for why evil cannot exist independently as a created substance. The first is that if evil were to exist, “it would be an incorruptible substance, a great good indeed” (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). Once again, only God can be incorruptible since only God is infinite. Furthermore, if evil were a “great good indeed” it would not be evil at all. This first notion of evil as a substance, therefore, is logically unfounded. Augustine continues his argument for the non-existence of evil as a substance by illustrating evil as, “a corruptible substance, and it would not be corruptible unless it were good” (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). By the nature that evil would have to be good in order to be corruptible, we can see that evil cannot serve as an existing substance. Despite the fact we may view evil as pure corruption (although we still have yet to see if evil is pure anything), that which is corrupted must be good, thereby removing any shadow of a doubt that evil is an existing substance.

The corruptible nature of human beings was strongly emphasized in the Manichaean teachings that greatly influenced Augustine in his youth. Torchia, in *Exploring Personhood* explains that, “the young Augustine was an uncritical materialist who assumed that anything which exists (including God) must be of a mutable and corruptible nature (*Exploring Personhood* 103). Augustine reflects on his Manichaean beliefs in the *Confessions* when he asks, “How could I see this, when with eyes I could see only bodies, and with my soul only phantasms?” (*Confessions* III,7(12)). The Manichaeans believed that there was a constant struggle in the world between the principles of Light and Dark. The constant back and forth between the good and evil, represented by Light and Dark, placed an emphasis on the materiality of human beings. The Manichaeans saw the spirit as good, yet the body as Dark and evil. Torchia explains that for Manichaeans, “salvation consisted in the liberation of the soul from the body, accompanied by the freeing of the particles of Light from their imprisonment in matter”

(*Confessions* III,7(12)). To young Augustine, this idea made perfect sense considering his belief that even God was subject to material corruption. Mann elucidates the Manichaeon position on evil when he says, “God is doing the best he can against evil, but finds himself facing an independent opponent as formidable as he” (Mann 40). If God were subject to materiality as the Manichaeans believed, the idea that God has a “formidable” opponent would be very easy for Augustine to understand. In fact, this formidable opponent would completely limit God’s divine attributes further supporting the Manichaeon idea of a radical dualism. To limit God’s attributes would ultimately place God in the realm of corruptibility. Regarding God’s corruptibility, Torchia presents the thrust of the Manichean argument by illustrating God as, “a great material mass diffused through infinite space” (*Exploring Personhood* 103). The greatest problem with the Manichaeon stance is not the struggle between the opposing forces, but rather the implications from such an idea. If God (the Light) were to be struggling against an opposing force (the Dark) we would be able to see a limitation on God’s powers, essentially nullifying His omnipotence. Torchia explains that while the Manichaeans abrogated God of His causation of evil, they did so, “at the expense of His perfection and incorruptibility” (*Creatio* 166).

Augustine’s break from the Manichaeans was natural after both the influences of Saint Ambrose and the “books of the Platonists” (*libri platoniorum*) (*Exploring Personhood* 104). Much of Augustine’s scholarship is rooted in Neoplatonic ideas. The basis for these views comes from Plotinus’ own thoughts regarding the problem of evil. In *Classical Thought*, Terence Irwin describes Plotinus as having a “harsh” view of matter, one that would suggest that Plotinus would, “reject the whole material universe as evil” (Irwin 195). Irwin continues by asserting that Plotinus’, “other worldly attitude seems to encourage the sort of cosmological dualism that treats the material as the product of the evil in conflict with the good in the

universe” (Irwin 195). Plotinus makes the distinction that evil actions are necessary in a good world, “since good is the avoidance of evil” (Irwin 195). He uses the drama to illustrate this claim. Irwin explains the analogy by noting that, “different actors play different parts, superior and inferior, but their parts are all designed for the perfection of the whole play” (Irwin 196). The point behind this theory is that if we are able to, “see the comparative unimportance of pain, death, and anything else that happens to the body, we will not overestimate the evils” (Irwin 196). By focusing too much on the depravities in society, Plotinus would argue that we are not looking to what is higher.

Augustine also draws upon Plotinus’ drama analogy to point out that human beings, because of their lack of perfection, are unable to see how the little actions of human life shape the greater life. Augustine differs from Plotinus in the sense that Plotinus believed that the smaller issues in life do not abound to anything great, whereas Augustine views the whole totality of being as something worthwhile to ponder. Mann explains Augustine’s position when he writes that, “the assessment of the good of the whole is more diachronic than synchronic. One who laments the passing away of particular ephemeral things should realize that to wish that they might last forever is to wish that not they but some other kind of being existed” (Mann 44-45). Augustine does not stop to contemplate why singular events in his life cause major change, but keeps building upon these actions—much like a snowball—until he is able to place his own life in perspective. The Neoplatonic lens by which Augustine writes the *Confessions* is evidenced by the claim that all things, in total, are greater than each individual thing. When Aristotle writes that, “the totality is not, as it were, a mere heap, but the whole is something besides the parts” in his *Metaphysics*, the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts strongly resonates with Augustine when he reasons that because God has not, “made all things

equal, it follows that all things, taken one by one, are good, and all things, taken together, are very good” (*Metaphysics* Book H 1045a 8-10; *Confessions* VII,12(18)).

Another Plotinian influence of Augustine rests in the idea that being has a hierarchical nature composed of three hypostases: the One, the intellect (*nous*), and the Soul. Torchia explains that, “The One gives rise to what is ontologically lower by virtue of an eternal process of emanation of its power and a diffusion of its goodness” (*Exploring Personhood* 105). By emanating its goodness, the One illuminates the intellect to move the Soul. The Soul, therefore, is involved in the higher aspects of the Intellect, in addition to, “communicating this intelligibility to lesser reality” (*Exploring Personhood* 105). The idea of created being looking to what is higher (true being) descends from Plato’s Theory of the Forms. Human beings’ ability to comprehend these higher truths would be impossible without the illuminated soul. Because the Soul is not fully capable of comprehending the One, it has a tendency to taint itself with non-being. Plotinus contends that the Soul, “becomes ugly—by something foisted upon it, by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into Matter” (*Ennead* I.6(5)). The ugliness of the Soul can be blamed on its unique position in the middle of Plotinus’ vision of reality. The orientation of the Soul, says Torchia, “establishes the moral quality of one’s life” (*Exploring Personhood* 107). In order to remove all that is ugly, Plotinus contends that the Soul must be, “cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate converse with the body, emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has thrust upon it, withdrawn, a solitary, to itself again” (*Ennead* I.6(5)). The purpose of the Soul is to always focus on the good, or what most mirrors the One.

As we have established, the ability to choose that which is least corrupted—or in Plotinian terms that which most mirrors the One—is not always the easiest choice for humans to

make. Plotinus defines the good as, “that on which all else depends, towards which all Existences aspire as to their source and their need, while Itself is without need, sufficient to Itself, aspiring to no other, the measure and Term of all” (*Ennead* I.8(2)). While all else may depend upon what is good, the dependence does not necessitate ease in terms of the good’s ability to be chosen. Sometimes what is best for our nature is not universally appealing. Evil, although not desirable, sometimes provides human beings with an easier course of actions. Setting the groundwork for Augustine, Plotinus argues that if evil were to exist at all, it would be situated, “in the realm of Non-Being, that it be some mode, as it were, of the Non-Being, that it have its seat in something in touch with Non-Being or to a certain degree communicate in Non-Being” (*Ennead* I.8(3)). When Plotinus claims that evil is Non-Being, he does not mean that it, “simply does not exist, but only something of an utterly different order from Authentic-Being” (*Ennead* I.8(3)). Existing as the opposite of Authentic-Being, Plotinus argues for the prior existence of evil, “even though it may not be an essence” (*Ennead* I.8(3)). While making this case, he contrasts the idea of the absolute good with the idea of that which is not absolutely good. In order for something to turn away from the absolute good, there must be an inherent predisposition toward the evil act, or else it would not be desirable at all. Plotinus asserts that there must be an Absolute Evil, whereby the Absolute Good is diluted along with the already corruptible being (*Ennead* I.8(3)).

Augustine departs from Plotinus with this assertion of an Absolute Evil. Instead of an Absolute Evil, Augustine argues for evil to be considered a privation or absence of the Good in human beings: a privation so strong so as to reach the point of, “complete nonentity” (*Confessions* III,7(12)). Torchia calls this instance of nonexistence by corruption a, “displacement in the nature itself” (*Creatio* 170). Instead of an inherent evil in human beings,

there is an inherent privation in human beings. This privation is the result of human beings', "tendency towards mutability and corruption, an unavoidable liability of their having been created *ex nihilo*" (Mann 44). Torchia asserts that, "For Augustine, the corruptibility of created things is rooted in the fact that they were brought into being from nothing by God" (*Creatio* 165). To say that human beings were created *ex nihilo* is not to say that they were created from Non-Being, but rather that they were created, quite literally, from nothing.

Creatio ex nihilo has more implications than the omnipotence of God. The fact that humans are created from nothing binds them, "with mutability and all of the deterioration prompted by change" (*Creatio* 175). Augustine explains that human beings experience both metaphysical and moral corruption. Metaphysical corruption is a direct result of the negativity of the mutability of that which is created. As Torchia describes, this negativity is not, "a privation, but only the absence of a perfection greater than what a creature should possess by nature" (*Creatio* 175). Negativity does not necessitate a lack of moral integrity in terms of choosing the higher, but more, it manifests the lack of perfection in creation. People can be hurt and feel pain, but this is not the definition of evil in the vernacular. Moreover, we live our lives constantly experiencing mutability in this sense without thinking whatsoever of the repercussions. On the one hand, very rarely do human beings find themselves altogether concerned with the moral turpitude of stubbing their toe. On the other hand, human beings do tend to preoccupy themselves with thoughts about the moral turpitude of their actions relating to the misuse of creation. Augustine posits the idea that if human beings, "continue to be, and still continue to be incapable of suffering corruption, they will be better than before, because they will remain forever incorruptible" (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). Unfortunately for human beings, this idea cannot exist for it implies that human beings would be on the same ontological level as

God (existing while incorruptible). By making that statement we would equate God with nothingness (*Creatio* 168). The reasoning for this is that, “God’s immutability is the mark of His preeminent Being” (*Creatio* 169). While God’s immutability places Him as the highest degree of perfection, within creation itself there are varying degrees of not only perfection but also corruption.

The power of God’s incorruptibility transcends being subject to mutability; it places God in the position to oversee the corruptible nature of creation. Having the ability to oversee creation gives God the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Returning to our earlier discussion on the logical ramifications of the problem of evil, if evil exists then we cannot say God has those powers. As we have discussed however, we have demonstrated not only the divine attributes of God, but also the practical existence of evil. The greatest problem with understanding Augustine’s argument comes in the semantics of the “existence” of evil. While Augustine denies the substantial existence of evil, the average person would not understand his ontological denial of evil. An objector would argue that if evil does not exist as a substance, what could it exist as? What makes Augustine’s theodicy unique is his ability to limit the scope of substantial being. Through the belief in *creatio ex nihilo* Augustine is able to show God’s divine attributes. Using these attributes in his theodicy, Augustine reflects that, “you have made all things good, and that there are no substances that you have not made” (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). While this statement affirms God’s role as Creator, it does not fully address why evil can still exist in the world. An objector would call to question God’s role in human actions if He is the creator and allows evil to exist.

Modern empiricist David Hume addresses the origin of human actions in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Action*. In order to fully illustrate the power of human actions, we must take

into consideration where the action begins. Hume argues that if God is the cause of human actions, then these actions cannot have any moral turpitude, “as proceeding from so good a cause” (Hume 66). Consequently, human beings are not responsible for their actions, because these actions stem from God. If the action stems from God, humanity is essentially acquitted of moral repercussions. According to Hume, if these actions have any turpitude, “they must involve our creator in the same guilt, while he is acknowledged to be their ultimate cause and author” (Hume 66). If Hume is correct in this belief, God’s divine attributes are seemingly nullified. He explains that, “actions are, by their very nature, temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from some *cause* in the character and disposition of the person who performed them, they can neither redound to his honour if good; nor infamy if evil” (Hume 65). By reasoning that actions are not originated in the character of a person, we must question what moves the person to act in a certain way. Hume continues by arguing that, “the actions themselves may be blameable; they may be contrary to all the rules of morality and religion: But the person is not answerable for them; and as they proceed from nothing in him” (Hume 65). Much like Augustine espouses *creatio ex nihilo* regarding humanity, Hume appears to espouse *creatio ex nihilo* regarding human actions. And also much like Augustine credits God with *creatio ex nihilo* regarding humanity, Hume appears to credit God with *creatio ex nihilo* regarding human actions. Hume concludes by arguing that, “The ultimate Author of all our volitions is the Creator of the world, who first bestowed motion in this immense machine, and placed all beings in that particular position, whence every subsequent event, by an inevitable necessity, must result” (Hume 66). Although approaching the problem of evil from a completely opposite position, Hume still sheds light on what the average person fails to see in Augustine—the cause of human actions and the moral implications of such actions.

The main problem Augustine would have with Hume's analysis is that we cannot deny God's divine attributes. Augustine explains that in his youth he, "had no explicit and orderly knowledge of the cause of evil. Yet whatever it was, I saw that it must be sought out in such wise that I would not be constrained to believe that the immutable God is mutable, lest I myself become the very thing I was seeking to explain" (*Confessions* VII,3(4)). In trying to avoid becoming what he aims to define, Augustine examines human free will and the existence of evil. He writes that, "I was absolutely certain when I willed a thing or refused to will it that it was I alone who willed or refused to will" (*Confessions* VII,3(5)). If Augustine had stopped here, we would still have had a valid response for Hume's argument regarding God's involvement in human actions. As we have seen, Augustine takes this a step farther and denies the existence of evil as a substance, and resultantly denies God's causation of evil. Augustine states that God has, "made all things good, and that there are no substances whatsoever that you have not made" (*Confessions* VII,12(18)). Ultimately Augustine's theodicy defends God's divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, and does so in a way as to commend God for a good creation. The problem with this defense, though, is that while it shows human corruption and privation of good as the source of evil, it begs the question of why God does not intercede to stop evil things from happening to a good creation. People view these evil things as punishments, and many times, undeserved punishments. So just as Augustine's theodicy still holds relevance in today's world, so does Augustine's earlier concern that humanity is being punished through the presence of evil (*Confessions* VII,3(5)).

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