Beyond Augustine's Answer to Evil

DONALD M. BORCHERT

BABIES being born without arms, typhoons claiming numerous lives in the Far East, troubled lives seeking an escape through suicide, strontium-90 appearing in our milk, workmen trying to untangle the debris of crashed super-jets—events such as these are driving not a few Christians to think long and hard about a problem which has throughout the ages shaken faith and perturbed the souls of sincere seekers: namely, the problem of evil.

Perhaps no soul was more disturbed by this problem than was Augustine's (A.D. 354–430); and perhaps from his struggle we may discover some pointers to guide our thinking.

I. AUGUSTINE'S METHODOLOGY

At least two features of Augustine's method are worthy of special notice. First of all, his concern seems to be *existential* rather than merely academic. Too much evil was present in his day—indeed, even in his own life—to permit him the comfort of cloistered speculation. For years the pleasures of sexual excesses had paralysed his will to live righteously. For decades the foundations of the Roman Empire had been crumbling under the pressures of economic instability, governmental degeneration, growing immorality, and barbarian invasions. Especially did the latter add to the horror of the day. In Augustine's own Africa, if a walled city refused to surrender, the Vandals would drive their prisoners against the walls and slaughter them there in droves so that the stench of their decaying bodies would make the city uninhabitable.[1] Accordingly, although Augustine was unacquainted with radioactive fall-out and thalidomide, nevertheless he came face to face with real evils which forced him to ask, with equal urgency, the questions which moderns also pose: How can *this* world be the work of a benevolent, omnipotent God? Why does he allow such things to happen?

In the second place, Augustine's method may be characterized as "faith seeking understanding." He writes:

> You cannot do better than believe even when you do not know the reason for your faith. To think the best of God is the truest foundation of piety.... Our present endeavour is to obtain intelligent knowledge and assurance of what we have accepted in faith.[2]

Surely Marion LeRoy Burton has done less than justice to Augustine when

1. Cf. Christopher Dawson, "St. Augustine and his Age," in M. C. d'Arcy *et al.*, *St. Augustine* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), pp. 15–77.
2. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, I, ii, 5; cf. *De vera religione*, vii, 12; x, 20.

he says that Augustine approaches this question from "the purely intellectual standpoint."[3] It is true that Augustine uses his reason to the hilt, but he also strives to keep his thinking controlled by his faith. His method seems to be to hold fast to the truth of revelation and to seek to understand how it is related to life here and now.

With this orientation, then, Augustine tried to reconcile his faith in a good Creator with the evils that plague this world. To a discussion of his attempt attention is now directed.

II. Augustine's Answer

Although Augustine was exposed to Christian influences early in his life, he embraced Christianity only after a long journey through various religio-philosophies. One of the wayside inns in which he resided during this pilgrimage to Christianity was Manichaeism, which had a rather appealing solution to the problem of evil. Founded in Persia by the prophet-martyr Mani (ca. A.D. 215–276), Manichaeism was a combination of elements from Zoroastrianism, mystery religions, and probably Greek philosophy. It was a thoroughgoing dualism, which, by means of a cosmic myth, explained the problem of evil as a transcendent conflict between light and darkness, good and evil. This conflict eventually spilled over into a created world which became the stage for the struggle of cosmic forces. Man's part in this battle was to overcome the tugs and desires created by elements of darkness and to pursue the life of light. Since the dark elements were usually associated with the body, the life of light took the form of asceticism (victory by denial). Thus, the problem of evil was met in theory by a consistent dualism, and in practice by asceticism.[4]

Perhaps his disillusionment with Manichaean moral purity, his studies in science, and his Christian mother's devout life were factors which drove Augustine to break with Manichaeism. At any rate, his journey to Christianity soon brought him into the halls of Neo-Platonism, where he learned to think of evil in terms of non-being. Armed with this concept, Augustine after his conversion became a devastating critic of Manichaeism.

The Manichaeans believed that the supreme God of Light was good and all-powerful. Yet they maintained that there was an eternal kingdom of darkness and evil opposed to this supreme God. Augustine apparently learned from Nebridius[5] a version of the Stoic dilemma which was given one of its earliest formulations by Epicurus in his attack on the Stoics.[6] This dilemma Augustine used to great advantage to confound the Manichaeans, even as Irenaeus had used a variation of it centuries before to trounce the

3. Marion LeRoy Burton, *The Problem of Evil: A Criticism of the Augustinian Point of View* (Chicago: Open Court, 1909), Preface.
4. Cf. A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (7 vols., London: Williams & Norgate, 1896–99), Vol. III, pp. 316f.
5. Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones*, Bk. VII.
6. Cf. Lactantius, *De ira dei*, XIII.

Gnostics.[7] The dilemma argues that either God cannot abolish evil or he will not; if he cannot, then he is not all-powerful; if he will not, then he is not all-good. Such logic set the heads of the dualistic Manichaeans spinning, since it showed that their supreme God was either impotent or evil.

But how did Augustine himself avoid a similar fate on the dilemma's horns?

1. *He saw God as the Creator of all that is.* Accordingly, all things are good since made by God, finite since they had a beginning,[8] and mutable since they were created, not out of God's immutable being, but out of nothing.[9] Mutability or changeability of created things constitutes the *possibility* for evil, not the *source* of evil (as Burton says of Augustine's view).[10]

2. *He defined evil in terms of non-being.* If all things as such are good, then the only province left which may be called evil is the realm of non-being. Augustine speaks of evil passively: it is "the privation of the good,"[11] "the absence of good,"[12] and "defective being."[13] He also describes it actively: "the diminishing of the good"[14] and "corruption."[15] The main feature to note is that evil as such has no being of its own.[16] It is a vacuum of being and goodness. It is, so to speak, a parasite which eats away at the good, and which ceases to exist as soon as there is no good left to consume.

3. *He uses aesthetic motifs to explain away evil on the sub-rational level of creation.* From our finite and partial perspective evil may seem to pervade creation, but from a total view of the universe (which God alone truly has) all things harmonize into a beautiful and ordered whole.[17] For example, transience in temporal things is not evil; without it we would not have the beauty of the seasons, etc.[18] Nor is animal pain evil; it is a good since their pain shows us that they strive for unity and seek to avoid disintegration, thereby reminding us of God, who is the supreme form and ultimate source of all unity.[19]

4. *He limits evil to the rational level of creation. Sin and its penalty* are the only evils in God's world.[20] Augustine came to regard sin as an act of turning away from God, the supreme good, to some lesser good.[21] Sin is misdirected love. A life which turns away from God tends to non-being, to nothingness.[22] Now the cause of the rational creature's turning away from

7. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. haereses*, II, v.
8. Cf. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, II, xv, 40–xvii, 46; *De civitate dei*, XII, v; *Enchiridion*, x; *De natura boni*, xvii; *Conf.* VII.
9. Cf. *De civ. dei*, XII, i; *De vera religione*, xviii, 35–xix, 37; *Enchiridion*, xii.
10. Cf. Burton, *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 56f.
11. *Conf.*, III, vii.
12. *Enchiridion*, xi.
13. *Ibid.*, xiii.
14. *De natura boni*, xvii.
15. *Ibid.*, iv; vii.
16. Cf. *Enchiridion*, xii–xiv.
17. Cf. *De vera religione*, xl, 76–xliii, 81.
18. Cf. *ibid.*, xxii, 42f.; *De libero arbitrio*, III, xv, 42.
19. Cf. *De libero arbitrio*, III, xxiii, 69f.
20. Cf. *De vera religione*, xii, 23; xl, 76.
21. Cf. *ibid.*, xx, 38.
22. Cf. *ibid.*, xi, 21

God resides neither in an *eternally* evil will, since there is no such thing,[23] nor in the lesser good to which the will turns, since lesser goods do not have such power over the highest created good, rational creatures,[24] nor in the nature of the soul, since all natures were created good.[25] Instead, Augustine sets the cause of sin squarely within the will itself. That is what he means by "deficient causation."[26] He says that the cause of a bad will is a "deficient cause," which means there is no other source of sin than the will itself. Rational creatures sin and fall by their own free choice.

If man fell by virtue of a free will, is not such a free will incompatible with God's foreknowledge? No! God has foreknowledge of our acts of free will. The two are quite compatible.[27] But if God foreknew what would happen, why did he give man a free will at all? God took a risk in giving man such a free will. He wanted man to respond to him freely. Without a free will there could be no such response, and hence no righteousness. But in order for there to be righteousness the possibility of unrighteousness was at the same time created.[28]

But does not sin mar the beauty and order of God's creation? Here Augustine once again employs aesthetic motifs, but this time not to explain evil away, but rather to affirm the continued beauty and order of God's universe. The sin of the creature is straightway balanced by the penalties with which God afflicts him, and which are not evil in themselves but evil only in relation to man. Thus, the harmony of sin and its penalties contributes to the over-all harmony of the universe.[29]

What about the innocent suffering of infants? Does not their pain throw the universe out of balance? Here Augustine is hard pressed for an answer. He suggests that their suffering is pedagogical for the sake of their parents, but also adds that God will surely have some special reward stored up for them to balance their pain.[30]

In brief, Augustine meets the Stoic dilemma, which he had used to confound the Manichaeans, by defining and limiting evil in such a way that the punch seems to be taken out of the problem. If all things are good, and if evil is defined in terms of non-being and is confined to the sphere of rational creation, then the problem is really reduced to the problem of making man's free-will-gone-astray compatible with God's goodness and omnipotence. To achieve this task, Augustine invokes the so-called "free-will defence" which interprets the possibility of sin as the unavoidable companion of the possibility of righteous response to God. To fulfil the latter God gave man free will, which at the same time involved the possibility of the former. God's goodness and omnipotence are further justified in that he

23. Cf. *De civ. dei*, XII, vi.
24. Cf. *De libero arbitrio*, I, xi.
25. Cf. *ibid.*, III, i, 2.
26. Cf. *De civ. dei*, XII, vii.
27. Cf. *De libero arbitrio*, III, iii, 8.
28. Cf. *ibid.*, II, i, 1–3.
29. Cf. *ibid.*, III, xv, 44; *De vera religione*, xxiii, 44.
30. Cf. *De libero arbitrio*, III, xxiii, 68.

afflicts man with judgment and penalties for his sin, not by creating evils, but by creating goods (e.g., hell-fire) which are evil *in relation to* sinful man.[31] Thereby God shows that his omnipotence is in ultimate control of the situation, and his goodness is reigning in that his judgment on sin shows both his justice (he afflicts man) and his mercy (he afflicts man so that he will repent).[32]

III. The Adequacy of Augustine's Answer

This answer to the problem of evil has many merits. It does justice to the biblical notion that creation is good and proceeds from a good God's action. It avoids the notion of an eternally evil being who stands over against God with the result that his omnipotence is called into question. It gives a biblical interpretation of sin as the radical worship of the creature rather than the Creator.

Notwithstanding these excellencies, Augustine's solution must be called into question at a number of points.

1. Can the suffering on the sub-rational level of creation be so easily dismissed by aesthetic motifs? It is true (as Leslie Weatherhead reminds us in *Why Do Men Suffer?*, and as C. S. Lewis cautions in *The Problem of Pain*[33] that we know very little about such things as animal pain; but to dismiss it from the problem of evil seems to be rather inadequate, especially in the light of man's continuity with lower forms of life as maintained by biological sciences.

2. Can it truthfully be said that God's creation is not disfigured by sin? Does sin plus its penalty really add up to a beautiful, balanced whole? Can anyone in all seriousness maintain that the piles of rubble and mutilated bodies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not disfigure the beauty of God's creation because sin is balanced by penalties?

3. What place does Augustine give to the Cross in his discussion of the problem of evil? Apparently very little. This omission is rather serious since at the Cross God's goodness and omnipotence are brought into a dynamic relationship with evil.

4. Has Augustine really broken the Stoic dilemma? True, he has narrowed the question down to the problem of free will and sin. True, he gives a defence of free will. But does not the Stoic dilemma even here raise its horns? Either God is unable to create a free will which would be so assisted or constituted that it would always make the proper decisions (for example, Jesus Christ's human will), or else he is unwilling; if he is unable, he is not all-powerful; if he is unwilling, he is not all-good. Has Augustine, then, really answered the question he posed to destroy the Manichaean heresy? Is it possible to solve the dilemma at all?

31. Cf. *De natura boni*, xxxviii.
32. Cf. *De vera religione*, xv, 29.
33. Cf. L. D. Weatherhead, *Why Do Men Suffer?* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1936), pp. 56f.; C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Bles, 1942), pp. 117f.

These considerations lead to the judgment that although Augustine has a tough-minded answer to the problem of evil, nevertheless his answer has grave deficiencies and his formulation of the problem in terms of the Stoic dilemma is inadequate.

A reformulation of the problem of evil is accordingly called for. A tempting reformulation is to inject into the three basic propositions (God is all-good; God is all-powerful; Evil exists) a fourth proposition, such as "God has a purpose." By so doing, evil is made the *tool* of an all-good and all-powerful God who is working out his purpose. Thus, for example, natural evil becomes part of the environment necessary for the development of responsible personality, which is part of the goal God has set for his creation's progressive development. Moral evil becomes pedagogical in order to teach man that it is wrong to sin since sin leads to dreadful consequences in interpersonal relations.

Although solutions of this type have the advantage of seeing God's purposeful action in the midst of evil, of seeing physical death as a part of God's intended plan, and of not making light of animal pain, nevertheless, they may be called into radical question, especially at one point. Natural evil is attributed to God as part of his creation.[34] Translated into brutally specific terms, this means that a baby who is dying of inoperable cancer of the eye was thus afflicted by God for the sake of the personality-pedagogy of its parents and a few others! If such is the case, God's goodness is sacrificed to his omnipotence and purpose, and in the end the Stoic dilemma is solved by saying that God is not all-good.

The apparent failure, however, of this approach leads to a strong questioning of the whole method of attacking the problem which has thus far been mentioned. It has often been assumed that the problem of evil is a *logical* one. Thus, for example, contemporary writers on the theme such as H. J. McCloskey[35] and J. L. Mackie consider the problem to be not scientific, nor practical, but logical. The whole Stoic dilemma is structured as a logical problem. But is logic an adequate approach to the problem?

It is to be granted that logical probing of such words as "omnipotence" will clear away such nonsensical ideas as that omnipotence means the ability to create a square circle, etc. Omnipotence does not mean the power to perform what is logically contradictory. Yet it is to be questioned whether logic can discover the truth or falsity of the two statements "God is omnipotent" and "God is all-good." These two statements purport to be factually significant, and as such their truth or falsity does not depend upon a logical analysis of them in conjunction with the statement "Evil exists." Instead, their truth or falsity depends upon empirical verification or falsification.

34. Cf. Burton, *The Problem of Evil*, p. 97. Nels Ferre, *Evil and the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper, 1947), tends towards the same position.

35. Cf. H. J. McCloskey, "God and Evil," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 10 (1960), 97–114; J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind*, 64 (1955), 200–12.

Now, it may be retorted, is not the existence of evil the necessary empirical evidence to falsify God's omnipotence and/or goodness?[36] To this the Christian may reply that the evidence is not all in yet, since he maintains that God will prove his omnipotence and all-goodness in the eschaton.[37] But must the Christian, then, as well as the unbeliever, suspend judgment on the problem of evil until the eschaton is ushered in? I think not. It is at this point that we gain some precious, though admittedly partial, light from the Cross of Christ. It is to this event that the Christian looks for an answer to the problem of evil. At the Cross eyes of faith see God's omnipotence manifested in the fact that he takes evil at its highest pitch (the brutal murder of the best man who ever lived) and makes it the very cord out of which he weaves the web of redemption. At the Cross eyes of faith see God's all-goodness manifested in the fact that he himself stoops to redeem and reconcile the creatures he himself created. Also, at the Cross, the Christian gains encouragement which enables him to rejoice in the midst of suffering, since to eyes of faith God proved his sovereignty over all evil by raising his Son from the dead, and demonstrated that he is a God who knows what it is like to suffer since he was in Christ.

At the Cross evil is displayed as an ugly fact. At the Cross eyes of faith discern an omnipotent and all-good God. How these two statements are to be reconciled is a *mystery* which transcends logic and which awaits the revelation of the eschaton.

36. Cf. A. Flew *et al.*, "Theology and Falsification," in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1956), pp. 96–130.
37. Cf. John H. Hick, "Theology and Verification," *Theology Today*, 17 (1960–61), 12–31.