Introduction: reaching disagreement

> Evil as such, which [allegory] cherished as enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory, and means something different from what it is. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents. The absolute vices, as exemplified by tyrants and intriguers, are allegories. They are not real, and that which they represent, they possess only in the subjective view of melancholy; they are this view, which is destroyed by its own offspring because they only signify its blindness. They point to the absolutely subjective pensiveness, to which alone they owe their existence. By its allegorical form evil as such reveals itself to be a subjective phenomenon.
>
> Walter Benjamin 1977, 233

SOME FACTS

Here are some facts:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and God saw that all was good, and so all is good. Among God's many creations was mankind, whom God gifted with freedom in order that they may love, both one another and God, as God loves them as well as God's self. The cost of this gift is risk; for a free being is by definition never wholly under another's control, and their actions can never be perfectly determined by another's will. In creating free beings in order to enter into relationships of love with them, God risked the possibility that they would resist that love. And so we have.

Sin came into the world through the first humans, and by that act all after them are placed under its yoke. Now sin spreads its stain far and wide, and the whole world groans under its weight, but the bare fact that all creation *suffers* sin reveals that there is an underlying goodness to being which can be destroyed only by destroying being itself. So our sin does not end creation but mars it, echoing down through history, crippling all

humanity in its always futile, because never more than partial, revolt against its source of being in God.

As God's will demanded the final perfection of communion between human and divine, and as humans had refused that perfection, the redemption of humans required divine intercession. Christ's life, death, and Resurrection have secured that intercession, and the Incarnation has consummated God's relation to the world; through Christ, God's absolute involvement with the world secures the possibility of human salvation, and thus the fulfillment of the divine will. God in Christ comes in time, to redeem time, and so time, while still in part our prison, becomes also the theater of our redemption, and a vehicle for grace – the arena of our repentance, our slow, painful, turning back, in Christ and through the Spirit, to God. We suffer in the interim – indeed we suffer the very interim itself – until his second coming, when sin and death shall be no more. But now, in this in-between time, sin most emphatically does exist.

For Christians, this is our condition; and Christians rightly call these "facts," events accomplished, whose reality is evidenced in the lives we live today. Christian theology begins with these facts, and attempts to construct an account of the human situation which comprehends them all. But theology also begins where we are, in the middle of our muddied lives, so it must interpret those facts, and our understanding of our lives, in such a way as to reconcile them – in such a way that one explains the other, and that, vice versa, one exemplifies the other. In such attempts, questions naturally arise about the sense – both the specific meaning and the potential meaninglessness – of these theological claims. This book is concerned with one set of such questions: what light can this account throw upon our existence as moral creatures, particularly as *flawed* moral creatures? How are we to understand ourselves, and how *can* we understand ourselves within this account? What illumination can it bring to our experiences of fallibility, failure, and fault, and what illumination can such experiences bring to the account?

Sometimes reflection on our experiences can make this narrative seem deeply implausible, indeed possibly harmful, even to those (perhaps *especially* to those) who know the narrative best. Here, for example, is the theologian James M. Gustafson, reflecting to his old friend Paul Ramsey on the (in)adequacy of the Christian tradition's typical response to evil:

> I think the tradition has sold people short, Paul Ramsey. It has led them to expect things in the primary language of the tradition that failed over and over again. There are experiences of suffering in the world, Paul. There are experi-

ences of suffering of the innocent in the world, and traditional religious language has a way of just putting syrup on that stuff – and not suffering with the suffering, and not being in pain with those who are in pain! (Gustafson in Beckley and Swezey 1988, 239)

This book is meant especially for those who both feel the power of the Christian moral vision proclaimed above and yet remain painfully aware, with Gustafson, of its "Pollyannaish" perils. It is also meant for anyone who cares to think soberly and practically about the phenomena of evil; for I judge that anyone so interested would be wise to heed the Augustinian tradition of reflection on these matters. But the book does not resolve this tension for believers, or provide a tight solution for more skeptical inquirers. It means instead to show how the Augustinian tradition seeks to help humans accept this tension as inescapable in our world, and thus to help us more fully inhabit it, by learning to live with both claims simultaneously. By returning to one of the primordial sources for much Christian thinking about suffering and evil – Saint Augustine of Hippo – and by thinking through his thought, we can recover the lessons that he and the tradition he inaugurated – the Augustinian tradition – aimed to teach about understanding and responding to evil.

MODERNITY AND EVIL: SUBJECTIVISM AND ITS LIMITS

This is especially important now, because our culture seems to lack the ability, and more particularly the moral imagination, to respond usefully to evil, suffering, and tragic conflict. Indeed the whole intellectual history of modernity can be written as the story of our growing *in*comprehension of evil, of our inability adequately to understand both the evils we mean to oppose, and those in which we find ourselves implicated. Most philosophy, ethics, and even theology proceed magnificently, as if at the center of all our lives there did not squat this ugly, croaking toad.[1] We have largely forgone attempting to comprehend evil, and choose instead to try to ignore or dismiss it through some form of ironic alienation, muscular moralism, or (if you can imagine it) some combination of the two. This problem cripples our thinking about how to respond to evil, and leaves us trapped in a stuttering inarticulateness when faced with its challenges. Andrew Delbanco puts it well: "A gap has opened up between our awareness of evil and the intellectual resources

[1] Exceptions include, in different ways, Berkouwer 1971, Midgley 1986, C. Plantinga 1995.

we have for handling it" (1995, 3). We know neither how to resist nor how to suffer evil, to a significant degree because we do not understand it: it bewilders us, and our typical response to it is merely a theatricalization, a histrionic which reveals no real horror at the reality and danger of evil but rather our fear of admitting our incomprehension of what we confront, what it is we are called to respond to, when we encounter evil. We oscillate between what Mark Edmundson calls a glib optimism of "facile transcendence" and a frightened, pessimistic, "gothic" foreboding (1997, xiv–xv, 154–5); this oscillation exhibits the guilty conscience of modernity.

In this setting, any attempt directly to reflect upon evil is already also, and simultaneously, an attempt to deconstruct the modern project's most grandiose self-understanding – not in order to renounce modernity's achievements, but rather to detach them from the perilously Promethean triumphalism within which they are so frequently embedded. It is no surprise, then, that the greatest modern self-critics, namely, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, reflected in sustained ways on our difficulties in coming to grips with what we have traditionally called "evil", Merold Westphal aptly calls them "the great modern theologians of original sin" (1993, 3). And it is no surprise that their reflections led them, in different ways, to the conclusion that the root cause of modernity's failure adequately to conceptualize evil lies in the prototypically modern understanding of human being-in-the-world. Freud's philosophy of mind, and Nietzsche's philosophy of agency, both challenge the coherence of pictures of the self as a strictly autonomous being, precisely because such pictures cannot handle the full complexity of our situation before, and implication with, evil and tragic conflict. And they were right: our confusion before evil is due to modernity's general commitment to what I call "subjectivism," the belief that our existence in the world is determined first and foremost by our own (subjective) activities – that the sources of power and control in the universe are our acting will and knowing mind, before which the world is basically passive.

Subjectivism has disastrous consequences for our attempts to understand and respond to evil because it obscures our complex implication in the difficulties we face; it ignores how we are "always already" implicated in evil and mistakenly suggests that the challenge is straightforwardly (if not easily) soluble by direct action. It leads us to picture evil as fundamentally an *external* challenge to ourselves (hence making our basic moral claims ones of innocence and victimhood). Furthermore, even those contemporary positions that explicitly resist assent to subjectivism – most typically, significantly enough, prompted by reflection on evil and

tragic conflict – imply that vulnerability to such vexation is simply our "natural" situation, brought on by our failure to be perfectly subjectivistic agents, thereby offering us (as a consolation prize, as it were) a "wisdom" which threatens to plunge us into despair. In both cases, evil's challenge goes missing, and becomes redefined as either the simply contingent difficulties of our time and place, or the insuperable natural conditions of human existence.

Evil's problematic status to us is deeply debilitating – not because we need our noses rubbed in evil out of some juridically perverted urge to make us morally housebroken, but because we need to find a better way to respond to evil. Unfortunately, most of those who write on these matters, few as they are to begin with, rest content with speaking of our need to be perpetually "open" to "the tragic." I cannot speak for you, but the last time catastrophe happened to me, it did not knock and ask to be let in. We need not be told to be "open" to tragedy; such talk is actually an attempt to mitigate tragedy's damage to us, like leaving the front door unlocked so that the burglars will not break the frame when they come to rob and kill you. We do not need merely to hear the bad news, nor do we need a more intimate *acquaintance* with evil; we need to know *what to do about it*. Indeed without knowing what to do we will be psychologically incapable of acknowledging the depths of our depravity. To despair sufficiently, we need to hope. And until we transcend subjectivism, we cannot even know what real hope is.

THE AUGUSTINIAN TRADITION: PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

This book argues that the Augustinian tradition can help us better to understand and respond to evil. In a world riddled by conflict, cruelty, and suffering, a world which seems daily more vexed by these questions, renewed study of Augustine, who so famously brooded over these matters throughout his life, would seem to be a wise move. But this is a surprisingly controversial proposal, as Augustine is more often a spectral presence haunting the debate than a participant within it; he appears most often, in Goulven Madec's felicitous phrase, as the "evil genius" of our heritage (1994). Most contemporary thinkers mention his name merely to dissociate themselves from him, or to blame him for our own puzzlements before these issues. The reasons these thinkers give for this shunning of Augustine are interestingly different, and indeed even contradictory: some claim his picture of evil as privation is too "aesthetic," too consoling and optimistic, others claim his account of sin is

too "juridical," too repressive and pessimistic; some claim he legitimates violence against demonized opponents, others claim he makes us passive victims of others' assaults; some claim he is too otherworldly, others claim he is all too worldly, indeed even "Constantinian." While these critics' diagnoses of and prescriptions for our problems may differ, they share a common aversion to any attempt to return to Augustine; for them, progress in answering these questions is measured by movement away from all Augustinian resonances.

This book argues the reverse: despite contemporary prejudices to the contrary, Augustine's program, appropriated and extended by others – in particular, Reinhold Niebuhr and Hannah Arendt – offers much that we can still use. Even in our "demythologized" twentieth century there have been authentic Augustinians. (It seems odd to call the century with Nazism, Communism and consumerist advertisement-culture a "demythologized" age; but let that one lie for now.) This claim – that a "tradition" of Augustinian thought persists in modernity – faces criticism from two sides. "Modernists" argue that past thinkers such as Augustine are defunct, while "anti-modernists" argue that modern thinkers such as Niebuhr and Arendt are failures. But both are far too simplistic in their posturing. Contemporary prejudices against the tradition are largely due to misrepresentations of the Augustinian proposal as grounded most basically on a negative insight into – sometimes more dramatically portrayed as a disgusted recoil from – the realities of sin and evil. In fact, however, Augustine's project is grounded most basically in his positive account of love (and correlatively freedom) rather than pessimism (and correlatively enslavement). And that account continues to inform some of the best work done in modernity on human existence. Hence, we can meet the challenges to the Augustinian tradition by showing how its insights, in both Augustine's own thought and in the thought of several of his recent descendants, remain vital to understanding our own ethical and religious situation.

To summarize those insights: the Augustinian tradition interprets evil's challenge in terms of two distinct conceptual mechanisms, one ontological and the other anthropological. Ontologically, in terms of the status of evil in the universe, it understands evil as nothing more than the *privation* of being and goodness – "evil" is not an existing thing at all, but rather the absence of existence, an ontological shortcoming. Anthropologically, in terms of the effect of evil on a human being, it depicts human wickedness as rooted in the sinful *perversion* of the human's good nature – created in the *imago Dei* – into a distorted, mis-

oriented, and false imitation of what the human should be. *Privation* and *perversion*: together these capture the conceptual contours within which the tradition proposes its practical response to evil. Against worries that these concepts are archaic, relics of a superstitious pre-modernity, the book shows how they continue to inform moral and religious reasoning in modernity, by tracking their role in modern thought. And theirs is a major role: Niebuhr's "Christian realism" develops Augustine's account of sin as perversion, and implies the normative account of human nature that that account assumes; similarly, Arendt's work on totalitarianism and "the banality of evil" develops an Augustinian account of evil as privation, and entails the normative metaphysic of creation from which that account derives. Two of the twentieth century's most important thinkers on evil and sin – perhaps *the* most important thinkers on this topic – are distinctively Augustinian in their accounts of evil and sin. This is no accident.

Then again, both accounts require substantial revision, for each is flawed by a partial adherence to subjectivism. Subjectivism can manifest itself *epistemologically*, in the belief that humans alone must construct their intellective relations to the world, or *agentially*, in the belief that humans act in ways that rely for their determination, wholly and finally, on the free and spontaneous choice of the human will. Niebuhr's "epistemological" subjectivism underlies his account of the roles "general" and "special" revelation play in shaping humans' interpretation of themselves, their world, and God; Arendt's action-subjectivism underlies her account of the human's capacity for action which is essentially non-teleological in form. For both of them, the self remains the primary actor: for Niebuhr, "in the beginning was the question," so to speak, the question that the self finds itself compelled to ask and answer; for Arendt "in the beginning was the deed." But the key subjectivist assumption both share is that in the beginning is *the self*.

Neither of them consciously endorsed subjectivism; on the contrary, the programs of both thinkers are sharply critical of particular manifestations of it. (Indeed, ironically enough, each critiqued the form of subjectivism the other suffers from.) And their critiques rely on insights that each appropriated from the Augustinian proposal. The subjectivist leaven in their thought is precisely what is *not* idiosyncratic to them, but part of their common modern inheritance, and even more precisely, that part of their inheritance that they did not themselves critically evaluate, but instead unreflectively assumed. Conversely, their real value lies in how they partly escaped these subjectivist commitments, a partial escape

that was due to their partial appropriations of the Augustinian tradition's insights. Niebuhr, impressed with the Augustinian tradition's analysis and critique of the various dogmas of voluntaristic freedom, avoided the voluntaristic valences of subjectivism; Arendt, educated by Heidegger and Jaspers to appreciate the agent's experiential situatedness within an environment and a "world" which orients the self, avoided the reflective form of subjectivism. So both were fundamentally opposed to some versions of subjectivism, and for reasons which are fundamentally related to their partial appropriation of an Augustinian proposal, both were able partially to escape this subjectivism. The difficulty with their positions lies in the *partiality* of their escape.

Because of this, neither account can wholeheartedly warrant our hope for the world, and both contain elements which work against that hope; hence neither can illuminate our response to evil's challenges in terms of a basic response of increased *commitment*. In explaining the necessity of faith as a support for sustaining hope in the face of the challenge of tragedy, Niebuhr "naturalizes" evil by positing evil as a preexisting and primordial force which we meet in interpreting our world, and so undermines our confidence that God is wholly good. Meanwhile, in unpacking the power of freedom to overcome evil in the world, Arendt ends up rendering us episodic beings, and so subverts our ability to talk about our relation to the world as one of deep commitment. The axiological ambivalence of Niebuhr's proposal subverts our rationale for why we should be committed to the world, while the anthropological voluntarism of Arendt's account cannot explain *how* we are committed to the world. By seeking to secure the primacy of the subject, Niebuhr and Arendt are led to imply that the subject is victimized by something not themselves – either (as in Niebuhr's case) an external determination to sin, or (as in Arendt's) an internal fountain of natality that determines the agent's action. In seeking to secure the subject's freedom, both instead enslave the self all the more firmly to forces it can never control. Their subjection to subjectivism turns out to be nothing more than a modern form of what Augustine diagnosed as the *libido dominandi*, the lust to dominate that is itself the dominating lust.

Each of these failures is rooted in a deeper failure to understand our relations to the world as essentially relations of love. Niebuhr's account insists that humans meet God most primordially in experiencing the absence of God, not in a fundamental experience of love which sustains and directs their existence even before they are aware of its operation; similarly, Arendt's account insists that action is strictly autonomous,

independent of any interests or goals, so action is essentially an *ex nihilo* reality happening within humans, a reality which cannot be understood as a loving response to the *mundus* which sustains our existence. Neither thinker wants wholly to do this; both, at other moments in their thought, conceive our relations to the world as basically erotic. But both are led by their residual subjectivist assumptions to undercut these more central motivations in ways which render their proposals incoherent. How can we advance beyond them?

In resolving the problems faced by both accounts, we are helped by a more thorough *ressourcement* of the work of St. Augustine. It is precisely those aspects of Niebuhr's and Arendt's thought in which Augustine's influence does not penetrate their modernist shells that were most vulnerable to subjectivist temptations; on the other hand, those aspects of their thought that were most Augustinian were most secure from such temptations – and indeed served them as the launching pads for powerful critiques of each other's subjectivist commitments. Thus our interest in offering a less subjectivist account than they admit may be materially advanced by offering a more thoroughly Augustinian proposal than they do. Augustine's theological anthropology resists our subjectivist temptations, and offers a well worked-out alternative to them: against subjectivism, a properly Augustinian anthropology understands human agency as always already related to both God and the world, so it chastens modern predilections for absolute autonomy while still affirming the subject's importance. To do better in grappling with evil, we must avoid subjectivism; and to be less subjectivist, we must be more Augustinian – or so this book argues.

REACHING DISAGREEMENT

This work makes this argument in three parts. Part I delineates evil's challenge to us, and drafts its understanding of the Augustinian tradition. Chapter one sketches the general contours of modernity's present perplexity before the challenge of evil, and diagnoses what in our situation makes it difficult for us to bring evil clearly into focus, locating our fundamental difficulty in our implicit commitment to subjectivist understandings of human existence. Chapter two describes the Augustinian response to evil, summarizes the concerns that the proposal typically elicits, and defends the Augustinian account against common claims that it develops from a negative insight into evil and sin, arguing instead that it derives from a more primary and fundamental positive vision of the

universe, the human, and God, built upon Augustine's account of love. Part II rehabilitates the conceptual fundaments of this Augustinian position, by tracking its role in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and Hannah Arendt – both (as is often recognized) in terms of their accounts of evil and sin, and (in a manner less well known) in the frameworks in which they place those accounts, frameworks which build upon Augustine's account of love. Yet neither Niebuhr's nor Arendt's formulation is fully adequate as it stands, for their Augustinian insights are undercut by subjectivist commitments which a fuller appropriation of the Augustinian proposal helps us expunge – a task greatly aided by their own partial apprehensions of (or at least openness to) the Augustinian insight into love's primordiality. Chapter three details Niebuhr's revision of Augustine's psychology of sin, beginning from his "Christian realist" account of original sin, and illuminates how his account, while crippled by subjectivism, still offers a hope we can mobilize practically, and so shows us how to acknowledge sin without collapsing into cynicism. Chapter four details Arendt's revision of Augustine's ontology, beginning from her account of "the banality of evil," and illuminates how this "banality of evil" thesis, while (again) hindered by her subjectivist assumptions, entails her "political ontology" and her practical proposal of *amor mundi*. Given these conceptual developments, Part III details the practical program following therefrom, arguing that the Augustinian tradition is ultimately a way of life offering a vibrant and world-affirming response to evil, in ways that its critics do not recognize. Against critics who accuse the tradition of otherworldly escapism and/or reactionary pessimism, Chapter five argues that the tradition demystifies and "demythologizes" the discourse of evil, refusing it any ultimate place in our cosmology by practices of forgiveness and "dirty-hands" action which allow humans to acknowledge the this-worldly inescapability of evil, suffering, and tragic conflict while still fully participating in worldly life. The book concludes by insisting that this response is not finally a *solution* to the problem of evil, but a resolute way of facing life vexed by that problem – a way of living in a world where evil will never be wholly defeated by human action, and yet a world where faith proclaims evil has already lost.

This argument is not likely to meet with general assent. But that is part of its value; its dissent from the contemporary consensus is not frivolous, a sort of diatribe from a crazy back-bencher made precious by its powerlessness. Today, when the confabulation and ritual demolition of straw men is quite common in normative inquiry, articulate and intelligent dis-