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G. R. Evans
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I · THE EXPERIENCE OF EVIL

At the age of forty-three, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo Regius, a popular and respected North African churchman whose books were already widely read, began to write his autobiography. It was an entirely personal account of his own spiritual progress, and yet it had an instant appeal to a readership in distant parts of the Empire, as well as to the friends for whom he wrote it. Augustine's story had something in it for everyone; he had been a philosopher and a Manichee; he had gone to the circus and the theatre; he had been to astrologers and magicians; he could recount tales of his childhood, experiences of family life like those which everyone remembered for himself.

He addressed himself to the God who, he had come to believe, had been guiding him throughout his search. (Among his friends he was usually the leader; here he follows humbly at a distance.) Yet there is nothing private about the *Confessions*. The dramatic monologue (we hear only one side of the conversation) was intended to be overheard. God already knows all, and more than all, that Augustine can tell him. It is for the sake of others that he has written down his experience.

That is not quite all. He had always been in the habit of talking his ideas over with his friends, and he knew well enough how to make himself clear to his readers, but in writing the *Confessions* he hoped to clarify his own ideas, too. He wanted to take stock, to review his progression through his intellectual difficulties.

He gives an account of his life and spiritual development up to a point eleven years before when he had become a Christian, and then he looks at the difference his conversion has made to him. The story has its climax in a famous moment of recognition and commitment in a garden in Milan. 'In an instant, it was as if my heart was flooded with the light of confidence, and all the shadows of uncertainty disappeared' (*Conf.* VIII.xii.29). He might have omitted 'as if'. The condition of his mind seemed to him to have changed not metaphorically but literally from darkness to light. In a sentence he gives us the principle which solved for him the problem of evil.

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Where light shines there cannot be darkness. When light comes, darkness proves to have been simply the absence of light. Where there is good, evil is driven out; it proves to have been simply an absence of good. The notion was grasped in an instant; Augustine says twice in the same chapter that it was presented to him outright (*Conf.* vii.xii).

It was not a new idea. A century before, Plotinus, the philosopher Augustine admired as a Plato reborn, had discussed the possibility that evil is nothing (*Ennead* i.viii.3). Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher who died about 130 A.D., says in his *Manual* that 'As a mark is not set up for men to miss, so neither does the nature of evil exist in the world', but as Augustine explored it, he discovered that, looked at in the light of Christian faith, it was an idea with a surprising capacity for development. It enabled him to solve a great many of the problems which had long troubled him. He spent the rest of his working life as a Christian writer exploring its implications. In the end it became something quite new in his hands, as fresh in its fully developed form as it had seemed to him when he first perceived its possibilities.

In the first Book of the *Confessions*, Augustine looks back upon his childhood self and exclaims to find himself 'Such a little boy and so great a sinner!' (*Conf.* i.xii.19). In what can he have sinned as a small child (*Conf.* i.vii.11)? He remembers that it is common to see infants crying greedily for food, or screwing up their faces with jealousy to see other children being fed, even when they are not themselves hungry (*Conf.* i.vii.11). Too young to have learned to control or hide their urges, children reveal transparently the evil that is in them. Augustine is in no doubt of the seriousness of the matter. Jealousy is, he believes, as strong in the infant as it would be in the adult. It is merely that infants are physically weak and undeveloped, and cannot act upon their wicked impulses as effectively as an adult would. It is the weakness of his body that makes an infant harmless (*innocens*), not any harmlessness or innocence of mind. Indeed, evil is so strong in the child that it seems to provide the very motive for his learning to speak. He strives to equip himself with language so that he can express his desires effectively (*Conf.* i.viii.13). Augustine's observations of other children confirm what he remembers of his own feelings at the same age. The problem of evil is not merely academic; Augustine has felt the fearsomeness of evil in his own experience. (Even though he did not at first perceive that this was so, evil was always primarily a human problem for him.)

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Yet this powerful force seems to spend itself in emptiness. The distinguishing mark of an evil action, as Augustine has observed it even in small children, is its unprofitableness. He sinned as a boy by acting against the wishes of his parents and teachers and refusing to work hard at school. This was wrong, not necessarily because they were right in their advice. (In fact their intention was that he should gain a skill which would advance him in the world. The learning he might have had could have been put to a higher use, certainly, but that was not the reason why his parents wanted him to have it.) Augustine disobeyed them, not because he wanted to do something better with his time, but out of sheer frivolity and a competitiveness which was directed at winning empty victories (*Conf.* i.x.16). The sheer inanity of evil is fully brought out in Augustine's description of the occasion when he and some friends stole pears from a tree in a neighbour's orchard. (This was an episode which, for Augustine, had the classic features of an evil action. Everyone knows, he says, that stealing is wrong; even a thief will not let others steal from him without protest.) When Augustine and his friends stole the pears they did so, not because they wanted to eat them, but from sheer love of evil. Augustine was wicked for a purpose so trivial that he can only say he was wicked for nothing (*gratis malus*). The cause of his wickedness was nothing but wickedness itself (*Conf.* ii.iv.9). His pleasure lay, not in eating the pears, which were of poor quality, but in the wickedness of the act of theft, which was a *condimentum* greatly improving their flavour (*Conf.* ii.vi.12).

Here lay the apparent paradox which perplexed him for so long. Evil is a powerful force, fully formed and fully effective in the smallest child, and yet evil is utterly trivial. To love evil is to love nothing (*Conf.* ii.viii.16). If Augustine got pleasure from nothing but the theft itself in the pear-tree episode, then he got pleasure from nothing at all, for that was nothing. This remained the fundamental paradox of evil for him. *Deprivatio* is one thing – a mere absence; but *depravatio* is something altogether more fearsome in its positive potential for doing damage.

Looking back, Augustine recognises the effect of evil upon him as one of obfuscation. He could not see the object of his enquiry clearly. He struggled to brush away the encircling fog of uncleanness, which was darkening his mind (*Conf.* vii.i.1). At every point he found a cloud cutting him off from the divine truth (*Conf.* ii.xvi.8). From the other side of the cloud, he is aware, the light was trying to break

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through, to illuminate his heart and penetrate its shadows. To change the image, we may say that evil is dirt and its presence makes it difficult for the understanding to operate by clogging the mind with filth. Out of that filth God was waiting to pluck him and wipe him clean (*Conf.* vi.xvi.8). While he was stuck fast in it, he could not make sense of the paradox of evil. Or we may say that the sinful soul is like a ruined house (*Conf.* i.v.6), which only God can rebuild. It is narrow and confined (*Conf.* i.v.6), and only God can enlarge it. The inhabitant of this 'house of the soul' cannot understand the problem of evil while he lives in disorder in so confined a space.

No image of evil seemed so apt to Augustine as that of the knot or entanglement. He describes how the cloud of evil tried to entangle him by rolling him over and over (*Conf.* iii.xi.19); how Alypius was caught up in the entertainments of Carthage: (*volveretur*) (*Conf.* vi.vii.12). He speaks of the 'knots of cunning calumnies' (*Conf.* vi.iii.4), and asks, 'who can untie that most twisted and entangled knottiness?' (*Conf.* ii.x.18). The paths he treads in his sinfulness are twisted ones (*Conf.* ii.ii.3; v.xii.22), but God straightens out his actions and turns him back into the path which leads straight to himself (*Conf.* iv.iv.7). He now realises that the question of the cause or origin of evil was itself a knotty and entangled problem (*explicita et enodata*) (*Conf.* vii.iii.4–5); it proved to be full of contradictions when he came to investigate it.

'Knots' form because when the good has been abandoned and the will has moved off course by a falling-away (a *defectus*) or a turning away (an *aversio*) it will career crazily about, lost, without a sense of direction, and tie itself in knots. The knots are the inevitable ultimate result of the first *defectus* of the will. The curve in things which is initiated by a divergence from the straight becomes a twist and then a kink and then a knot, and finally a hopeless tangle, as it moves further and further away from the straightness of the good. The degree to which evil has affected the good can be measured by the extent of the knottiness it has produced.

These images were not new ones. Augustine takes over for his own use several notions which are to be found in contemporary writings. The images he employs have a literalness for him which makes them an exact description of evil's effect and operation as he has experienced it. They are presented in the *Confessions* as though they came freshly to Augustine's mind; no doubt it seemed to him that they did. They almost cease to be images in his hands; like the

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experience of illumination at the moment of his conversion, they seemed to him to describe not metaphorically but literally the nature and operation of evil.

He sees now that the very attempt to search for the cause of evil in the way that he did was itself an evil thing. He observes that the Manichees were full of wickedness themselves, although they pretended to be searching for evil from the highest motives (*Conf.* vii.iii.4). Augustine himself, when he sought the cause of evil, sought it wickedly (*male quaerebam*), because he followed a distorted route. He should have sought God first and then looked about him to see where evil was (*Conf.* vii.v.7). That would have led him by the straight and proper road to the conclusion that evil could be nowhere at all, because it could have no existence in God's universe. In that way, the attempt to search for the cause of evil would have been a good thing, and everything would have fallen into place. The apparent paradox would have been seen to be an illusion. Now, in the *Confessions*, he is able to write of his search for evil in a good and proper way, because he is beginning from the right place, from God himself.

At first, he had been readier to believe that God could be affected by evil than to accept that man could do evil (*Conf.* vii.iii.4). Before he could make any headway with a solution to the problem of evil, Augustine had to shift his ground and see that the root of the trouble lay with man. If God had anything to do with evil, its presence in the world would be intolerable to the minds of his rational creatures, for it would make him either himself evil, or a weak and feeble God who could not resist evil. Only on the hypothesis that he gave his intelligent creatures so supreme a freedom that they could choose to turn away from him could God's good creation be seen to be capable of evil. And given Augustine's strong sense of the powerfulness of evil's effect, it was a short step from there to an understanding of the way in which one man's act, Adam's sin of disobedience and greed for the fruit of the tree of knowledge, could infect all his posterity and require divine intervention of a kind astounding in its generosity to repair the damage. By becoming man and dying, God demonstrated in a grand paradox a strength in weakness which reversed the effect of evil on human nature. The logical entailment of these steps was irresistible to Augustine when once he was a Christian and understood their implications.

But for the moment, as he reflects on his thinking before his

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conversion, he sees that again he was approaching the problem from the wrong end, and discovering contradiction and paradox as a result. If he had begun from the assumption that the divine substance could not be affected in any way by evil, he would have found himself looking for the source of a *corruptio* which was powerless against the good, and he would have come much sooner to the conclusion that evil was nothing (*Conf.* vii.iii.4–iv.6). In the same way, he would have understood at once how it was that he himself could both will evil and not-will good, for he would have known that evil was the absence of good (*Conf.* vii.iii.4). He would have seen why it was that of his own will he could do only evil. For if God is the source of all that is good, and all that exists is good, Augustine himself can be the source only of what does not exist: that is, of evil. Only by the grace of God can he do good (*Cbnf.* ii.vii.15). He would have realised that the fear of evil is itself evil, indeed that the more the thing feared is nothing, the more evil is the fear of it, because evil itself is a nothing (*Conf.* vii.v.7). He would have seen the absurdity of being afraid of something which is not there (*Conf.* vii.v.7). All the problems which seemed insoluble for so many years would have vanished at a stroke. Above all, he would have found his central problem solved: how can there be room for evil in the universe, since God made everything, and everything he made is good? (*Conf.* vii.v.7). The question 'Where is evil?' can have only one answer which makes sense of all Augustine's difficulties. Evil is nowhere because evil is a nothing.

It might be objected that this solution resolves one set of apparent paradoxes, only to give rise to another, as indeed Augustine found, but for Augustine it had one substantial recommendation – a conceptual elegance which made it seem self-evidently true when he hit upon it. He had found himself disappointed over and over again by explanations which seemed satisfactory for a time and then left him caught in paradox again. He came in the end to a point where nothing but a 'mathematical' degree of certainty would satisfy him. He wanted to be as sure of the solution to the problem of evil as he was that seven and three make ten (*Conf.* vi.iv.6), as sure, in other words, as reason could make him (for he borrows his arithmetical example from Aristotle).

II · THE PROBLEM PRESENTS ITSELF

I A Changed Man

When he was twenty, newly arrived in Carthage from his home town of Thagaste to study rhetoric, Christianity seemed to Augustine merely one of a dozen religious and philosophical systems he might choose between, and far from the most attractive. He had been brought up by a Christian mother; Christianity was familiar to him through her example, but he understood it as yet only superficially. It was customary to keep the deep things of the faith from catechumens and to allow only the baptised to be present at certain acts of worship. Augustine came to see this *disciplina arcani* as a desirable thing. He emphasises in his commentaries on John's Gospel (xcvi.3) how helpful it is in making the Christian value these secret things when at last they are revealed to him. But the effect on the young Augustine was to encourage him to reject Christianity because he found its façade unimposing.

By the time he was forty he was burning with enthusiasm for the Christian faith. It seemed to him to outshine all other faiths and philosophies so brightly that no other choice made any sense at all. The change came dramatically in the end, but, looking back, Augustine could see how he had progressed stage by stage through all the alternatives, until he understood the unique rightness of the Christian view of things. What was the driving force behind all this striving? It was in some respects unremarkable: the search for enlightenment and a way to a higher life was something on which many of Augustine's friends were also engaged. He did not make his intellectual and spiritual odyssey alone. He took his friends with him – often literally – and there were always talks and discussions on the way. Augustine's friend Alypius was converted first to philosophy and then to Manicheism; he was a young man given to excesses, but Nebridius, another friend and a man of naturally puritan inclination, followed a similar path. It was the natural thing for an able young man to do in the society in which Augustine grew up; an interest in

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religion was rather like the interest a modern counterpart of Augustine might be expected to take in politics while he was at university.

For Augustine the search had a particular point. Side by side with his desire to discover where the truth lay and how best to arrive at it, was his need to find an answer to the problem of evil in the universe. This troubled him more than any other single question. At first it seemed to him that Christians left the difficulty unresolved. It was weariness with the effort of making sense of their apparent failure to grapple with the problem which drove him to those heretics the Manichees for an explanation, he claims (*De Lib. Arb.* 1.ii.4); when the Manichees disappointed him too he turned to the philosophers.

Serious in his quest he certainly was, but he enjoyed the chase. He speaks of the *scholae dissentientes* of which he had read among the philosophers, the 'diverse' beliefs about the nature of the gods, the ascent of the soul to its true state as a spiritual creature, the role of fate and of providence in men's lives, the place of the created world in the scheme of things, which gave such variety to contemporary religious debate (*De Ver. Rel.* 1.i). 'They all disagree!' he exclaims (*De Ver. Rel.* v.xi). This is an expression of exasperation, but there can be no doubt of his own delight in the rousing debate (which had now come more or less to a consensus among the philosophers themselves). The late fourth century was a stimulating time for such a mind as the young Augustine's, serious and passionate, cultured, not scholarly perhaps, but full of life and curiosity.

Many of the systems of the philosophers would have offered him the satisfaction of achieving a high purpose by effort and self-discipline. They provided answers to great questions and a sense of direction. Philosophy demanded as much of a change in the philosopher as Christianity did in the Christian. Seneca, Stoic of the first century A.D., describes the alteration it had brought about in him. 'I realise, Lucilius', he says, 'that I am not only being made a better man; I am being transformed.' (*Letter* 6.1). In this way philosophy met many of the needs Christianity also met. We may speak of a philosophical 'conversion'; Augustine himself experienced one, as we shall see, more than a decade before his conversion to Christianity. The Pythagoreans abstained from meat so as to purify their souls for the contemplation of things beyond carnal imagination. The Cynics taught detachment from the business of the

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world, as a way to free the soul for higher preoccupations. The Stoics encouraged a piety in which there was a hope of moral improvement for the individual. The Epicureans wanted to teach men how to be happy. Each offered a way of life.

Although he had as yet only an inkling of all this, it is easy to see how, from the vantage-point of his early twenties, it seemed to Augustine a poor-spirited thing to adopt his mother's religion, which appeared merely a simple piety, and become a Christian. He did not reject Christianity altogether, but his education had taught him to think of the spiritual as something lodged in the realm of abstract thought – to which it was generally agreed that philosophy gave the best means of access. Both the elegance of expression and the tightness of argument he had been taught to admire were more apparent to him in the systems of the philosophers than in the book on which his mother Monica's quiet faith rested. She was, as Augustine describes her, full of good works, devout with the simple piety of a countrywoman, which showed itself in a devotion to the shrines of the martyrs for which St Ambrose later chastised her (*Conf.* vi.ii.2). It is unlikely that she had education or wit enough to match her son in argument, or impress him with an intellectual Christianity.

Augustine first lived away from home at Carthage, where he went to study in 374. Like any undergraduate, he felt free to choose for himself how he would live and what he would believe, and he sampled all the religious spectacle Carthage had to offer. He describes, with a profound distaste in retrospect, how as a young man he used sometimes to watch the 'sacrilegious entertainments' the pagans put on for their gods. He used to enjoy the games, 'shameful' though they were, and the performances before the mother of the gods, Berecynthia (Cybele, Rhea), which, with 'lewd actions and filthy words' made a mockery of the purification which was the pretext of the festival held in her honour each spring. 'If these are sacred rites, what is sacrilege?' asks Augustine (*De Civ. Dei* II.4). In later years the theatre often came into his mind when he was looking for an image of all that is false and deceitful. But in Carthage he did not feel constrained by his Christian upbringing. He went to the theatre and enjoyed it.

It would not be true to say that his upbringing in a Christian household left no mark on him. He was attracted by the theatre because he found in the plays stimulus for his own fantasies ('fuel for

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my own fire', as he puts it), and a vicarious pleasure in the events enacted before him ('images of my own miseries'), not because he wanted to worship the gods in whose honour the plays were performed (*Conf.* III.ii.3–4). He kept up a nominal Christian observance, going to church more with an eye to the girls who might be seen there than out of piety. His mother had strengthened in him a naturally powerful spiritual need and a habit of religion.

In his *Confessions* (III.iv.8) he describes the 'conversion' he experienced when – in the ordinary course of study at Carthage – he came to read Cicero's *Hortensius*. The book showed him the height above his present petty concerns to which he might rise by taking up philosophy. 'That book contains an exhortation to philosophy' which, he says, 'changed my outlook'. He saw that only wisdom was worth pursuing, and with all the singlemindedness of his nature he bent a fervent desire on the attainment of wisdom. This first insight which fired him with a love of ideas was to sustain him through many disappointments.

How far his conception of this 'wisdom' was coloured by Christian habits of thought it is difficult to say. In his description of the episode he sees in it the first occasion when God firmly took hold of him and turned his face towards him, but he was writing many years later, and as a Christian. It would be surprising if there had been no admixture of Christianity in his response, for the idea of Christ which was strongest in the minds of contemporary Christians envisaged him as the Wisdom of God. In fourth-century pictures and reliefs Christ is not represented on the cross but teaching his wisdom to a group of disciples, much as a philosopher would teach in the schoolrooms with which Augustine was familiar.

It is striking evidence that this was indeed a natural association of ideas that Augustine turned, not to the writings of the philosophers, but to the Bible for help in his quest (*Conf.* III.v.9). He found Scripture too crude for his tastes. His orator's education made it seem philosophically and stylistically *indigna* in comparison with the *Tulliana dignitas*, the Ciceronian elegance of the book which had inspired him. Why did he not simply read the philosophers, which would have seemed the obvious course? The principal impediment probably lay in the difficulty he had in learning Greek (*Conf.* I.xiii and xiv). In Latin he was fluent at an early age, but it seems unlikely that he ever succeeded in reading Greek with ease. If he wanted to