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AUGUSTINE ON EVIL

G.R. EVANS

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

First published 1982
First paperback edition 1990
Reprinted 1991, 1993, 1994

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 81-21793

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Evans, G.R.
Augustine on evil
1. Augustine, Saint. Bishop of Hippo
2. Good and evil
I. Title
231'.8 B655.27

ISBN 0 521 39743 X paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2000

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Dr D. Turner and Dr R. Williams, who kindly read drafts of this book, and the Rev. Professor H. Chadwick, Mr John Ferguson, Professor R. Markus and Sir Richard Southern, with whom I have talked over various parts of it, for their kindness and for their advice.

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PREFACE

Again and again, over a period of nearly half a century, Augustine returned to the problem of evil in his writings. The solution he puts before us as he works it out stage by painful stage, is the result of his own struggle with a problem he urgently wanted to solve from the moment when, as a boy, he first understood what it meant. Even when he thought he saw the way to an answer it proved to be full of unforeseen difficulties. One modern critic has complained that his solution suffers from 'a radical incoherence'. It was an incoherence which he himself undoubtedly felt, and that is why he continued to work at the matter; but his very bafflement, the very open-ended quality of his thought, helped him to perform what was arguably the greatest service he did for his contemporaries and successors: he set the problem out in all its complexity.

This study attempts to follow him in his progress towards a solution. It is a challenging task to master Augustine's views on any subject, not because his arguments are difficult to follow, or because he does not make himself clear, but because he raises in passing almost as many questions as he answers. It seemed so to his contemporaries, too. His readers often wrote to him to ask him to develop a point or settle a question he had left untouched. We cannot do so now; but in one respect we are better placed than those who knew him personally: we can stand back and look at the unfolding of his solution as a whole, at its strengths and weaknesses. We can try to distinguish the elements of permanent value and those strands of Augustine's thought which will no longer bear the weight he puts upon them.

Above all, we can watch a mind at work. That capacity for making connections which was perhaps the most distinctive feature of Augustine's thought, enables him to draw the threads together, weaving a fabric of great richness and subtlety out of the assumptions and habits of thought of the day. Augustine's solution to the problem of evil is a *tour de force*. Whether we regard it as still helpful, or as interesting principally because of the influence it has had upon

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Western thought for fifteen hundred years, it cannot but be striking in its scale and magnificence, its essential boldness and simplicity and in the patient working out of its details.

Augustine believed that truth is absolute and never changes. If we abandon his view of truth we cut ourselves loose from the fixed points of reference which seemed so sure to Augustine and to many generations after him. This is the criterion by which we must judge the value of his solution of the problem of evil for today, if only because if we adopt any other measure we shall not be considering Augustine's solution at all.

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between the notion that the truth itself does not change, and the view that statements which were held to be true by those who formulated them must remain true for all time in the same terms. No technical terminology changes more subtly and elusively in meaning from generation to generation than that of the theologian. Augustine himself was aware of this; he is full of concern for differences between common usage and the special usages of Scripture, and he is alert to novelties of usage. He framed his definitions in the terms of contemporary philosophy, but with caveats and provisos. In the same spirit of caution, he took as axiomatic a number of principles whose self-evidency would now be open to question: among them much of the apparatus of Neoplatonic thought. Was the *res* which underlay his *verba*, the 'reality' of which he was struggling to speak accurately, a lastingly valid solution to the problem of evil?

Whether or not we regard his monumental achievement as a satisfactory answer to the problem depends on where we believe the real problem of evil lies. Does it consist in the intolerability of the idea that something may be contrary to the good, in a universe created by a Being who is entirely good and all-powerful – as Augustine thought at first? Or does it lie in the damage evil does to rational beings – those beings most like God and intended to live in loving unity with him; the beings most like God, for whom, arguably, the rest of the world was made? Is the existence of sin the real problem of evil? That is the view to which Augustine came gradually after his conversion. Everything else – animal pain, disruptions to the natural order such as earthquakes, traffic accidents – can be referred to one or the other of these. The problem of evil must be either God-centred or man-centred. We may regard Hell as an estrangement of man from God for

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all eternity because sin stands between them, or as a region of darkness, a metaphysical anomaly, the dwelling-place of spirits who have no kinship with God at all, as the Manichees envisaged it. The alternative to the view that man is the source of evil (and that it is man that we must examine if we are to understand what evil is and what it does) is the view that God is helpless in the face of an evil which threatens him – or else himself the source of an evil which would seem to contradict his very nature.

The four types of argument about the problem of evil which, at different times and in different forms, have been put forward since Augustine's day can all be reduced to these two alternatives. The explanation that evil is nothing, a mere contrast which makes the goodness of the good more striking, an illusion, is tantamount to saying that metaphysically speaking there is no problem of evil. God is good, and everything that exists is good, and there is no such thing as evil. The God who is the Supreme Good of Neoplatonism remains intact. This is a God-centred view of evil, in which the fact of God's divine nature thrusts out the possibility that evil may exist.

A second 'God-centred' view admits the existence of evil as an independent principle. A latter-day Christian dualism sees God as engaged in a battle with evil. Christ's death upon the Cross and his Resurrection was a victory over an evil which had to be fought and defeated. 'Process' theology sees God himself as a limited being, struggling against evil, gradually bringing the universe to order, involved in a conflict in which, metaphysically, evil is very real indeed.

A third 'God-centred' view says that God cannot do wrong, and that everything he does is therefore good. The problem of evil disappears if we take the view that nothing that happens can be evil. By definition, everything must be included in the sphere of the good, and what appears to be evil is not an absence of good at all, but itself a good. There are elements of all these explanations (rejected or accepted) in Augustine's writings. There have perhaps been no fundamentally new insights about the problem of evil, but merely a shifting of emphasis, a moving of the pillars of the discussion.

The same might be said of the fourth possibility, a man-centred view of the problem, and that is the notion that goodness would be less valuable if it were an inalienable part of man's nature. Man must become perfect by freely co-operating with God. Here, too, we are on

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familiar ground, although Augustine came to doubt more and more that man could earn his goodness in any way at all by his own efforts.

This explanation assumes that 'Man is so made that on any hypothesis to fulfil his destiny he has need of God's external help.'¹ Whether man had ever sinned or not, he would have needed God's assistance through grace to become perfect. Augustine is sure of that. Ultimately, evil is irrelevant. God takes it into his plan for the universe and makes it work for him. It is the 'creation' of a creature, sprung from man's misuse of his will, and the misuse of the wills of the fallen angels. It is no more than a gnat-bite – certainly not a hideous disease deforming the universe. A man-centred view of the problem of evil makes evil of far less account than a God-centred view. It is an optimistic explanation. Augustine's confidence grew as he saw more clearly the implications of the idea that evil springs from the will alone. He ceased to feel the deep anxiety which had troubled him when he believed that evil was something which threatened or limited God. Without for a moment under-estimating the damage evil may do in the individual human soul, he saw evil diminish before him.

Augustine came to see the world, then, as a 'vale of soul-making',² and evil of no more importance in a man's life than he consents (with the aid of divine grace) to allow it to be. There is a magnificent calm about the Augustinian conception in its final working-out; it gives the believer that tranquillity of mind which he and the philosophers alike believed to be the mark of a good man. Whether we find it an acceptable view now depends, not on the lasting validity of the forms of words Augustine used, but on our willingness to accept his premisses: that God is good and the author of all things; that all things are good; that man is the cause of his own troubles; that those troubles are an illusion – that evil is, in other words, no more than a deceiving appearance.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CCCM	Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
PG	J.P. Migne, Patrologia Graeca
PL	J.P. Migne, Patrologia Latina

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT FOR THE WORKS OF AUGUSTINE

- Contra Academicos* (386) *C. Acad.*
De Beata Vita (386) *De Beata Vita*
De Ordine (386) *De Ord.*
Soliloquia (386) *Sol.*
De Immortalitate Animae (387) *De Im. An.*
De Musica (387) *De Mus.*
De Quantitate Animae (388) *De Quant. An.*
De Libero Arbitrio (Book 1, 388; Books II–III, 391–5) *De Lib. Arb.*
De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae (388) *De Mor. Ecc. Cath.*
De Moribus Manichaeorum (388) *De Mor. Man.*
De Genesi contra Manichaeos (388–90) *De Gen. c. Man.*
De Diversis Quaestionibus lxxxiii (388–96) *De Div. Quaest.*
De Magistro (389) *De Mag.*
De Vera Religione (389–91) *De Ver. Rel.*
De Utilitate Credendi (391–2) *De Ut. Cred.*
De Duabus Animabus contra Manichaeos (391–2) *De Duab. An.*
Enarrationes in Psalmos (392–420) *En. Ps.*
De Fide et Symbolo (393) *De Fid. et Symb.*
De Genesi ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber (393–4) *De Gen. ad Lit.*
Imp.
De Sermone Domini in Monte (394) *Sermon on the Mount*
Expositio 84 Propositionum Epistolae ad Romanos (394–5) *Exp. ad Rom.*
Epistolae ad Romanos Inchoata Expositio (394–5) *Ad Rom.*
Expositio Epistolae ad Galatas (394–5) *Ad Gal.*

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De Mendacio (394–5) *De Mend.*
Ad Simplicianum De Diversis Quaestionibus (396) *De Div. Quaest. Simp.*
Contra Epistolam quam vocant Fundamenti (396) *Fund. Ep.*
De Doctrina Christiana (396–426) *De Doct. Chr.*
Quaestiones Evangeliorum (397–400) *Quaest. Ev.*
Contra Faustum Manichaeum (397–8) *C. Faust.*
Confessiones (397–401) *Conf.*
Contra Felicem Manichaeum (398) *C. Fel.*
De Natura Boni contra Manichaeos (399) *De Nat. Bon.*
Contra Secundinum Manichaeum (399) *Secund.*
Adnotationes in Job (399) *In Job*
De Catechizandis Rudibus (399–40) *De Cat. Rud.*
De Trinitate (399–419) *De Trin.*
De Fide Rerum quae non videntur (400) *De Fid. Rerum*
De Consensu Evangelistarum (400) *De Cons. Ev.*
De Bono Conjugali (400–1) *De Bon Conj.*
De Sancta Virginitate (401) *De Sanct. Virg.*
De Genesi ad Litteram (401–414) *De Gen. ad Lit.*
De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione (411–12) *De Pec. Mer.*
De Spiritu et Littera (412) *De Sp. et Lit.*
De Videndo Deo ad Paulinam (413) *De Vid. Deo.* (= Letter 147)
De Civitate Dei (413–27) *De Civ. Dei*
De Natura et Gratia (413–15) *De Nat. et Grat.*
Tractatus in Joannis Evangelium (?408/414–7) *In John*
De Origine Animae (415) *De Or. An.* (= Letter 166)
De Perfectione Justitiae Hominis (415–6) *De Per. Just. Hom.*
De Gratia Christi et de Peccato Originali (418) *De Grat. Chr.*
Locutiones in Heptateuchon (419) *Loc. in Hept.*
Quaestiones in Heptateuchon (419) *Quaest. in Hept.*
Quaestiones VIII ex Vetero Testamento (419) *Vet. Test.*
De Anima et eius Origine (419–21) *De An. et Or.*
Contra Mendacium (420) *Contra Mendacium*
De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia (420) *De Nupt.*
Contra Duas Epistolas Pelagianorum (420–1) *Against Two Letters*
Contra Julianum (421–2) *C. Jul.*
Enchiridion ad Laurentium (421–3) *Enchiridion*
De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio (426–7) *De Grat. et Lib. Arb.*
Retractiones (426–7) *Retr.*

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De Praedestinatione Sanctorum (428–9) De Praed. Sanct.
De Dono Perseverantiae (428–9) De Don. Pers.
Contra Secundam Juliani Responsonem Opus
Imperfectum (429–30) Op. Imp.