

NOTES, INSIGHTS AND FLASHES

An Analysis of Augustine’s Argument in *Confessions* That Evil Does Not Exist

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For Augustine, following Genesis, it is a bedrock belief that creation is good. Perhaps this is the Augustinian belief. But it immediately gives rise to what is perhaps the Augustinian problem, namely, the problem of evil. For “[w]here then does evil come from, seeing that God is good and made all things good?” (Augustine 1992, 76; 1963, 130). In book 7 of the *Confessions*, Augustine famously denies that evil exists. His argument (book 7, chapter 12) takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*.

§1. Analysis

According to Augustine (I employ in the following [Augustine 1963, 140–141]):

- Things that are good are subject to corruption.
- Things would not be subject to corruption if they were either 1) supremely good or 2) not good at all. Supremely good things are by definition incorruptible. Things that are not good at all have nothing that could be corrupted, since corruption does harm, and harm is the diminishment of the good of a thing.
- What is to be demonstrated is that things that are deprived of all good cease to exist altogether.
- If things can no longer be corrupted, yet go on existing, they would be better than they were before they were corrupted.
- (Why? Unspoken premise: It is better for things to be incorruptible than to be corruptible.)

- But it is absurd to assert that things could become better by being deprived of all their goodness.
- Therefore, if things are deprived of all their goodness, they must not exist. (Again, to assert that they could exist without goodness is absurd, for it is to say that things could be in a better state [namely, incorruptibility] by becoming worse.)
- It follows that all things that exist are good. So long as they exist, they are good.
- It also follows that evil is not a “substance,” that is, not an existent thing, since if it were a substance it would be good, because all things that are, are inasmuch as they are good.

§2. Observations

Given Augustine’s bedrock belief that creation is good, it only makes sense for him to think that things move toward evil by being corrupted or by losing good (think of a rotting piece of fruit). But what if something did not become evil through corruption (the deprivation of its good), but were evil to begin with (which is the Manichean view)? Augustine rules out this possibility by postulating that “God is good and made all things good.” The point of his argument is to secure this postulate: that is, to persuade us that it is credible despite the problem of evil.

Nevertheless, the possibility that evil might be coeval with good has not been disproven. Augustine might counter that to assert that an evil thing exists is absurd for a different reason: It is absurd to assert that something without any good, and for this reason incorruptible, could be in a better state (namely, incorruptibility) than something that is good yet corruptible.

The critical premise in Augustine’s argument that I analyzed in §1, as well as in the counter that I just formulated for him, is the unspoken one, namely, that it is better for things to be incorruptible than to be corruptible. Recall that there are, according to Augustine, two ways to be incorruptible: 1) to be “supremely good”; 2) to be “not good at all.” It makes sense to say that something that is incorruptible because it is “supremely good” is better than something that is corruptible. Why?

The obvious answer is: Something that is incorruptible because it is supremely good is better than something that is corruptible *because the supremely good thing is, as supremely good, "more good."* But what makes the supremely good thing obviously better is its goodness, not its incorruptibility as such. In other words, it is not incorruptibility that makes the supremely good thing good; perhaps we should say instead that it is the thing's supreme goodness that makes its incorruptibility good. The important point is that *in this case* it is right to say that the incorruptible (the supremely good) is better than the corruptible. But what reason do we have to agree with the claim that to be incorruptible is *in every case* better than to be corruptible? The case of the supremely good does not give us any reason to agree that this claim holds for something that is "not good at all." Why say that a thing that has been totally corrupted or that is not good at all—and *for this reason* is incorruptible—is *better* than when it was not corrupted or than a thing that is good yet corruptible? It seems much more sensible to reject *this* claim as absurd, which, however, undercuts Augustine's *reductio ad absurdum*.

The upshot is that Augustine's argument in book 7 does not logically compel us to agree with either his conception of creation (that it is good) or his conception of evil (in terms of corruption of the good). Other reasons must be given.

It is interesting to consider Shakespeare's *King Lear* in this regard. In the words of the critic A.C. Bradley, *King Lear* is

the tragedy in which evil is shown in the greatest abundance.... On the one hand we see a world which generates terrible evil in profusion. Further, the beings in whom this evil appears at its strongest are able, to a certain extent, to thrive. They are not unhappy, and they have power to spread misery and destruction around them.... On the other hand, this evil is *merely* destructive: it founds nothing, and seems capable of existing only on foundations laid by its opposite. It is also self-destructive.... Thus the world in which evil appears seems to be at heart unfriendly to it. And this impression is confirmed by the fact that the convulsion of this world is due to evil, mainly in the worst forms here considered, partly in the milder forms which we call the errors or defects of the better characters. Good, in the widest sense, seems thus to be the principle of life and health in the world; evil, at least in these worst forms, to be a poison. The world reacts against it

violently, and, in the struggle to expel it, is driven to devastate itself.
(Bradley 1929, 303–304)

Is Shakespeare Augustinian here?

References

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