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### Augustine's Privation Theory of Evil

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### Augustine's Privation Theory of Evil

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Topic: Augustine's Privation Theory of Evil

Intro:

Thesis: Augustine's privation theory of evil places the responsibility of evil on man and allows for the existence of an all good, and all-powerful God.

Body:

- I. The Privation Theory allows for an all good God
  - a. All things God created are good
    1. Man and angels created good
  - b. Evil is move away from the good
    1. Evil is a parasite. Needs good to exist
    2. Evil is non-being
  - c. God did not will evil
    1. Evil is lack of accordance with God's will
  
- II. The Privation Theory allows for an all-powerful God
  - a. There is not another supreme evil being
    1. Manicheans are wrong (no opposing evil force)
    2. God is not a victim of evil, it does not affect Him (immutable)
  
- III. The Privation Theory places the responsibility for evil on man, not God
  - a. Evil is a result of the free choice of man
    1. Man is not victimized by an external reality
  - b. Evil is the rebellion of man against the creation
    1. Refusal of existence
    2. Pride
  
- IV. Refutations against the Privation Theory
  - a. This theory is not a theodicy
    1. Response (not supposed to be a theodicy)
    2. Not trying to justify evil, trying to show God is not responsible
  - b. The exclusion of evil is too hasty and limits God's omnipotence
    1. Response (do not want to attribute all evil to God)
    2. God did not create evil in order to fulfill His purposes
  - c. Why would an all good God allow privation to occur?
    1. Response (humans are mutable)

Within his *Confessions*, St. Augustine asks the important question, “Whence, then is evil? From what source and where did it break in here?”<sup>1</sup> Augustine acknowledges that it is an all-good and all-powerful God who rules over creation, so, he questions what this evil could be that seems to so disorder creation. G. R. Evans asserts that it was because Augustine was prompted by a deep desire to refute those who blamed God for evil that he wanted to explain what evil is.<sup>2</sup> This problem of evil is crucial to those who, like Augustine, wish to affirm that this world is necessarily grounded in a loving and omnipotent God. Augustine’s attempt at a solution to this problem of evil “attempts neither to dissolve the problem of evil, nor to insist on evil’s insurmountably; instead, it attempts to specify our intractable difficulties with evil while avoiding both naiveté and despair.”<sup>3</sup> Augustine promotes a privation theory of evil in response to this problem of evil. This theory states that evil is not a substance itself; instead, it is the corruption of a mutable good.<sup>4</sup> Augustine’s privation theory of evil places the responsibility of evil on man and allows for the existence of an all good, and all-powerful God.

All things that God creates are good, and the privation theory of evil allows for this all good creator God. For Augustine, it was a wholly good God who created a wholly good creation.<sup>5</sup> Because all of creation is created by an all good God, all of creation is viewed as being good as well. However, Samantha Thompson does point out wisely that all the good things which God makes are good, but it does not follow that they are good in the same way that God is good.<sup>6</sup> A distinction must be maintained between God and His creation. Augustine, in the

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*. Trans. Vernon J. Bourke. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press. 1966. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, G.R. *Augustine on Evil*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982. 112.

<sup>3</sup> Matthews, Charles T. *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 205.

<sup>4</sup> Hick, John. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 1977. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Matthews, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, Samantha E. “What Goodness Is: Order As Imagination of Writing in Augustine.” *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 65 no.3 (March 2012). 525-553. 530.

*Enchiridion*, writes that “all things that exist, therefore, seeing that the creator of them all is supremely good, are themselves good. But because they are not, like their creator, supremely unchangeably good, their good may be diminished and increased.”<sup>7</sup> This is the distinction between the good of the creator and the creation; the creation is a mutable good. Moreover, it is only when God intervenes directly with His creation and compels the will of man that man is capable of doing any good.

After establishing that both the creator and creation are good, Augustine then asks what is the source of evil?<sup>8</sup> Augustine concludes that evil must not be a substance because if it were a substance it would be good: “For, if it were a substance, it would be good. It would either be an incorruptible substance, and certainly a great good, or it would be a corruptible substance, which cannot be corrupted unless it is a good substance.”<sup>9</sup> This conclusion still allows for an all good creator God because all things created by God, including man, are still good.

Given this understanding that evil is not a substance, evil is then defined as a non-being and a parasite. Evil was not created by the all-good creator God, but is a move away from that good. Charles Matthews affirms this idea, saying that “God’s absolute goodness so exhausted the conceptual space of transcendence for Augustine that evil had to be solely a consequence of the created order’s swerve away from God.”<sup>10</sup> Nothing evil exists in and of itself because it is not a substance. It only exists as an evil piece of some actual entity. In his *City of God*, Augustine says this succinctly: “For evil has no positive nature; but the loss of good has received the name ‘evil.’”<sup>11</sup> Evil is dependent on the good for its existence. Like a parasite which must live off of

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<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo. *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, Trans. Henry Paolucci. Washington D.C: Regener Gateway, 1987. 12.

<sup>8</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions*. 169.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 183.

<sup>10</sup> Matthews. 64.

<sup>11</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo. *The City of God*. Trans. Marcus Dods. Edinburgh: Murray and Gibb. 2014. 447.

the life of others, so too must evil exist off of that which is good. Augustine explains how evil would have no foothold in creation unless man was capable of being corrupted to begin with: “Because corruption could not have either a place to dwell in, or a source to spring from, if there were nothing that could be corrupted.”<sup>12</sup> The presence of evil necessarily presupposes good.<sup>13</sup> Evil then is dependent on what is by nature a true substance and good. Evil cannot exist without good; however, good can exist without the presence of evil.

Gregory of Nyssa also believes that evil does not exist in itself; however, it does exist because of its dependence to other beings: “Gregory wishes to show how evil is not only an absence of the good, but a particular kind of absence that does in fact ‘exist’ in dependence on the powers of the created will.”<sup>14</sup> Gregory wants to differentiate between a created being and the creator of that being. The parasite has latched on to created beings and is moving them towards the non-existence which results from that evil. Evil is a movement of creation from the being of God which is a path towards non-existence.<sup>15</sup>

Samantha Thompson refers to evil things as ‘evil goods’ because they are good things which have become corrupted.<sup>16</sup> To help understand this concept of evil being the absence of goodness, Thomas Aquinas uses the illustration of sight. He explains that blindness is not a reality additional to the eyes, but a defect of them. Similarly, evil is not a substance of its own, but a lack of some positive power.<sup>17</sup> Augustine also points out that when an animal or person is injured or sick, this is just a lack of health. He claims that illness means nothing but the mere

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Mosshammer, Alden A. “Non-Being and Evil in Gregory of Nyssa.” *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 44 no. 2 (June 1990). 136-167. 140.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 136.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 137.

<sup>16</sup> Thompson. 525.

<sup>17</sup> Hick. 94.

absence of health.<sup>18</sup> In his *Confessions*, Augustine uses another image to illustrate the point. When discussing darkness, he asks, “What else is this than the absence of light?”<sup>19</sup> Augustine claims that where darkness is, it could not mean anything except that light was absent, just as there is silence where sound is not.<sup>20</sup> When inside a cave, darkness is not something which is being produced by a source within the cave, rather it is dark inside because the light is absent. However, Colleen McCluskey makes a very important point that mere absence of something is not necessarily evil. A privation such as the one Aquinas mentions when he discusses humanity’s lack of wings is not evil because it is not a characteristic of humans. Rather, she says, “Evil arises when there is a lack of a perfection that ordinarily ought to be present.”<sup>21</sup> Humans were created good, and ought to be good. So, this privation of goodness is evil, since mankind ought to be good.

For Augustine, what is good is also that which is orderly. Therefore, a lack of good would be a lack of order. Samantha Thompson comments, “And if order is equivalent to a thing’s good, then when it becomes disorderly it falls away from this good into a state of ‘privatio boni’.”<sup>22</sup> Since Augustine believes that the orderliness of mutable things is the way that they imitate their unchanging creator, then when beings are no longer striving to be like their creator they fall into disorder.<sup>23</sup> The lack of true unity, seen in changing things, leads Augustine to the conclusion that “changing things do not fully exist... since mutation over time and space cause one state of affairs to dissolve.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, since to be God is true unity with no change,

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<sup>18</sup> St. Augustine. *Enchiridion*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> St. Augustine. *Confessions*. 369.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> McCluskey, Colleen. *Thomas Aquinas on Moral Wrongdoing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson. 552.

<sup>23</sup> Thomson. 531.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 532.

then the attempt at oneness is an attempt to imitate God. Furthermore, the wide range of humanity's evils will have one thing in common. That is, all of these evils will merely be humanity's experiences of its self-imposed disorderliness. God is simplicity and unity, so, when creation falls away from God it falls into chaos.

Moreover, not only is evil a move away from goodness, but God did not will this evil into creation. Evil is a lack of accordance with God's will. Charles Matthews voices the concern that by giving God so much absolute authority over creation, the Christian tradition can then seem vulnerable to suggestions that God is responsible for evil.<sup>25</sup> However, Augustine's suggestion is a defense against such worries because of the concept of evil as privation. Matthews goes on to say that "if evil is the lack of being, then God cannot have willed evil, because God's will is precisely what is not evil, and evil is precisely the lack of accordance with God's will."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, God is a creator God and would not bring into the world something which has no-existence. The privation theory of evil allows Christians to maintain their belief in an all good God. Augustine highlights this goodness in the *Enchiridion* by explaining that the good creator never fails to give life to man even though they move against His goodness.<sup>27</sup>

The privation theory not only allows for an all-good God, but also for an all-powerful God. Augustine's privation theory means that there is not a supreme being of evil in opposition to God. Even when he was caught up in Manichaeism, Augustine was uncomfortable with many of its suppositions and when he finally left Manichaeism, he believed that their solution to evil was mistaken: "It pictured the God whom men worship as less than absolute, and as but one of two co-ordinate powers warring against each other."<sup>28</sup> Augustine insisted that "whatever evil may be

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<sup>25</sup> Matthews, 76.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*. 33.

<sup>28</sup> Hick. 39.

it neither comes from God nor detracts in any way from His sole and majestic sovereignty.”<sup>29</sup> For there to be two warring gods would make Christianity sound too much like Greek mythology. William E. Mann also discusses Manichaeism and says that the Manichaeans view God as doing the best He can against evil, but He is nonetheless facing an opponent as powerful as He is.<sup>30</sup> However, after leaving Manichaeism, Augustine asserted that evil is not a contrary opposing force. Since God is ultimate being, something contrary to God is non-existence.<sup>31</sup> Evil things are “His enemies, not through their power to hurt, but by their power to oppose Him. For God is unchangeable, and wholly proof against injury.”<sup>32</sup> If one understands evil using the privation theory, then evil is not something which can hurt God and which is more powerful than God.

Moreover, the privation theory places the responsibility for evil on man. It is not God who is at fault for evil; rather, the man’s free choice is the source. The privation theory helps us understand that evil was not created by God but is the result of voluntary turning of free creatures away from good.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, with this understanding, sin is directly the cause of unethical choices of free rational creatures. This maintains the innocence of God and at the same time shows the guilt of mankind. In both the *Enchiridion* and *The City of God*, Augustine asserts this opinion as well. In the former, he claims that man made bad use of their free will and the result of this was sin.<sup>34</sup> In the later work, he states that “these who are now evil did of their own will fall away from the light of goodness.”<sup>35</sup> He goes on to say that wickedness is not from

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in Hick. 39.

<sup>30</sup> Mann, William E. *Augustine’s Confessions: Critical Essays*. New York: Rowmann and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *City of God*. 484

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Hick. 52.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*. 122.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *City of God*. 453.

nature and it is contrary to nature because it comes from human will and not from the creator.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Augustine makes it clear that man's will is not controlled by God: "And I know likewise, that the will could not become evil were it unwilling to become so."<sup>37</sup> Man freely chose to abandon the natural good created by God, and therefore are the ones who are solely responsible for evil. This theory takes humanity's excuses away and the blame cannot be placed on some external being that oppresses them.

Evil is the rebellion of man against the creation and is a prideful refusal of existence. Since evil is not a substance, to participate in more evil is only to move further towards non-being. Men use their freedom to rebel against their creator and this "freedom against God's will is most fundamentally an attempt at resisting existence, an attempt whose failure manifests God's glory in creating us."<sup>38</sup> Alden Mosshammer explains that it is only possible for God to will being, but it is possible for men to will non-existence by not choosing being. The only way that men can exist is by participation in the being of God.<sup>39</sup> Augustine also discusses this saying, "This perpetual death of the wicked, then, that is, their alienation from the life of God, shall abide forever, and shall be common to them all."<sup>40</sup> Death and wickedness is absence from God, showing that it is man who is responsible for this evil. In *The City of God*, Augustine explains this again saying that men have turned away from a being who supremely 'is' towards themselves who do not possess this same essence.<sup>41</sup> It is men who are at fault because they trust their own being instead of God.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 457.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 491

<sup>38</sup> Matthews, 80.

<sup>39</sup> Mosshammer. 146.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine. *Enchiridion*. 131.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine. *City of God*. 487.

Therefore, when evil action is understood in this way, it is seen as a refusal to act. This action of man is not a failed attempt to respond in accordance to a loving God's will, but rather it is an attempt to deny it.<sup>42</sup> Mosshammer discusses Gregory of Nyssa's view of this rebellion against God saying, "This freedom of the will, since it is an image of the creative freedom of God, entails an inventive power, Gregory says, adding that there was found one who used this power wrongly and became the inventor of evil. Gregory might well have agreed with Augustine that those who rebel against God merely copy Him in a perverse way."<sup>43</sup> Man is endowed with creativity from their creator; however, they have used this gift irresponsibly. This is the ultimate protest: a creation's revolt against its creator. Humanity has seen fit to follow their will and fall into non-existence.

Many theologians have criticized Augustine's theory because they do not believe it proves to be a theodicy. Some believe that this is a bad theodicy and just denies the problem, however, "Augustine's privationist account is not so much a theodicy as it is an attempt to prevent theodicy questions from arising in the first place."<sup>44</sup> Augustine never intended his theory to be used as a theodicy. He was trying to shift the blame for evil from God to where it should be: on man. Since this theory was not meant to be a theodicy, it should be expected that questions are left after one accepts the privation theory.<sup>45</sup> As Charles Matthews explains, this argument is not meant to be about solving; rather, it is about bringing focus to the sheer absurdity of evil and allow men to face it.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Matthews. 78

<sup>43</sup> Mosshammer. 144.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>45</sup> McCloskey, H.J. "The Problem of Evil." *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 30 no. 3 (July 1962). 187-197. 189.

<sup>46</sup> Matthews. 77

Some worry that the exclusion of evil is too hasty and limits God's omnipotence. However, for Augustine, "God willed to create beings of the sort who could fall."<sup>47</sup> In contrast, the other position is committed to the claim that "every instance of evil shall, in the end, be shown to have been for the best."<sup>48</sup> However, this position means that God works through evil. Augustine is not ready to accept this position. Evil is not an instrument of God, but it is a privation resulting from the free will of man. This privation does not limit God's power because He is not a victim nor a commander of this evil.

In Augustine's view, to be good is to be.<sup>49</sup> In the Augustinian tradition, all existence is good and comes from God, so that evil is simply the refusal of existence. So, it cannot be claimed that evil is a separate entity: "Evil enters in only when some member of the universal kingdom, whether high or low in the hierarchy, renounces its proper role in the divine scheme and ceases to be what it is meant to be."<sup>50</sup> So, why would a being created by an all good God chose to renounce its proper role? The most fundamental reason is that creatures, unlike their creator, have a tendency towards mutability.<sup>51</sup> God who is immutable is not susceptible to this evil. As Augustine says, God is the unchangeable good.<sup>52</sup> Evil is nothing but a parasite which feeds off of the goodness of the mutable creation. To give evil too much power creates a more mythological version of the universe and gives Christianity a god more like Zeus than an omnipotent creator God. Augustine's privation theory of evil places the responsibility of evil on man because of their free will and allows for the existence of an all good, and all-powerful God.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 95

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Thompson. 525.

<sup>50</sup> Hick. 47.

<sup>51</sup> Mann. 72.

<sup>52</sup> Augustine. *City of God*. 453.

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