

Evil

Did God Create it?

Is He to Blame?

The question that troubled Saint Augustine as a young man is a question that still troubles many today. The question is this: God is the creator of all things. Evil exists. Therefore God must have created evil! And if God created evil He cannot be perfectly good. As logical as this course of reasoning seems Saint Augustine resisted it. While unable to give an adequate answer to the problem of evil he remained loyal to the idea that God is good. In this resistance he showed a degree of piety even before he was fully converted. Initially Saint Augustine embraced the Manichean heresy as a response to this dilemma (and because it offered him a ready rationalization for his sexual failings). Manichaeism had a dualistic cosmology, with two equally divine beings: one good and the other evil; one who created the spiritual realm that was seen as good and the other who created the physical realm that was seen as evil.

While one obviously cannot agree with Saint Augustine's Manichaeism in the early part of his life there is nonetheless a good point here to keep in mind when we ask questions about God. We should never ask the question about evil as if we are putting God in the courtroom box of the accused and then demanding that He explain Himself to us. Many people do this. When they see evil things happening to good people they conclude either that there is no God or that God does not care. In either case such people often decide to withhold their allegiance and worship of God, judging Him unfit for it. This attitude risks being proud, ungrateful, and impious. One should not indulge in it under the guise of being intellectually honest. Others have honestly confronted the same issues while still maintaining a deep reverence for God, thus eventually gaining some profound, albeit limited insight.

To return to the problem: Saint Augustine converted to the Catholic faith, giving up Manichean dualism. He was again confronted with his initial dilemma. It is an article of Catholic faith that God created all things and created them good. He did not want to say that God was the cause of evil. Yet, neither did Saint Augustine wish to say that evil was not some kind of a reality. He knew very well from his own experience that evil was a real factor in his life and in the lives of others. It was no illusion. He finally resolved the intellectual dilemma by discovering that evil, though a reality, is not a separate kind of thing existing independent of the good things around it. Rather evil is a kind of distortion or deficiency in some good thing that effects its ability to fully realize what God created it to be. In other words evil is a deficiency in the way something exists and it is that deficiency – that absence of a

good quality God originally intended – that is the cause of much suffering. Defects in physical things, like blindness, can be termed physical or natural evils. Deficiencies in human actions, like lying, are called moral evils. Let us go over that.

It makes a great difference to a person whether he is blind or has his sight. Yet blindness is not a being (a thing) in the strict sense. Rather blindness is the lack of a quality that should be present in the organ of the eye. In other words, blindness is a physical defect, a lack, an imperfection. The technical name for this lack is the term "privation". Now evil is a privation. It is a lack in the goodness God created a thing to have – like an eye having sight or our moral actions having the proper dignity and conformity to truth. If we disobey the will of God, our moral action lacks the goodness it should have. Because such actions are disordered (i.e. not in keeping with God's designs for us) their effects can be destructive to the good. They can cause great harm to ourselves and to others. Much of our suffering in this life is of this sort. The result of moral evils done by ourselves or by others. Creatures should be obedient to their Creator. A human action that is an evil action, then, is a disordered thing, a defective thing. In this case it is man's decision to act in disregard of God's will and the nature God has given him that is the cause of the evil, not God Himself. God created us with freedom to choose. And free choice involves the risk of choosing wrongly.

But what of natural evils – evils resulting from natural processes such as earthquakes, floods and diseases? Here it is important first to recognize that we live in a fallen world, fallen away from God's original design in creating it, and that we are vulnerable to natural forces in a way that would not have occurred had man not chosen to rebel against God. An unfallen creation would still have had its limitations (only God is perfect) but we would not have suffered because of them. Even so, it is difficult to imagine how we could function as free creatures in a world much different than our own – a world in which consistent natural processes allow us to predict with some certainty the consequences of our choices and physical actions. Take the law of gravity, for instance. This is a natural process without which we could not possibly function as human beings; yet under some circumstances it is also capable of resulting in great harm. The same is true of fire. It can be used by man to cook food and give heat and light. These are all good things. But the same power in fire can also burn and destroy. And these are not always good things. Certainly God is capable of destroying evil – but not without destroying human freedom, or the present world He created for us to function in. In the end, our faith tells us, He shall make an end to all evil – physical, natural and moral – with the full coming of God's kingdom.

Many agree that this line of reasoning does give some insight into the problem of evil. However, it does not fully satisfy – the mystery of evil cannot be completely solved in this life. Denial of God does not rid oneself of the problem of evil: as to its cause, meaning, and eventual eradication. Saint Augustine’s solution, however, helps us to understand the nature and cause of evil while respecting the glory and goodness of God as Creator. Everything created by God is good. Evil has a kind of existence but is not a being – a thing – in itself created by God. It is rather a privation in being, a lacking of a good quality that was originally intended to be there, whose moral cause is the will of man. Originally it was the disobedience of Adam that brought evil into man’s life. It was through Adam’s sin that suffering and death came to him and all his descendents (Genesis 2:17, 3:14-19). We have since compounded its effect. It is true that the angels had already introduced moral evil into the universe by revolting against God. But their evil did not touch the human race until Adam and Eve listened to the serpent in the Garden. Jesus Christ came to reconcile us to God and to transform our lives. But in a fallen world the way He chose to do this was the Way of the Cross. In Christ God has experienced with us the sufferings evil brings, but through His obedience unto death we have been redeemed. In the end Christ’s victory over sin and death will be ours. In Heaven every tear shall be wiped away and at the end of time a new creation will dawn.