

“ONLY SOMETHING GOOD CAN BE EVIL”: THE GENESIS OF AUGUSTINE’S SECULAR AMBIVALENCE

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THAT THE CAREER of Augustine constitutes a major turning point in the history of Christian political and social thought is scarcely open to doubt, although the reasons given are quite varied. His writings are the first sustained reflections on the social dimensions of what it meant to be a Christian. The phenomenon of sin was inextricably part of those reflections; indeed, it was the need to account for sin that forced Augustine to turn his attention to politics. Recently Gillian Evans has explored Augustine’s theological analysis of evil as a privation of the good (*privatio boni*), and Elaine Pagels has derived Augustine’s claim that self-government was impossible from his notion of human bondage to sin developed most fully in the Pelagian controversy.¹ Even more recently Peter Iver Kaufman has shown the importance of the Donatist controversy in giving shape to Augustine’s attitudes toward sin.² The purpose of this article is to take yet another step backwards, to the genesis of Augustine’s attitudes toward sin and evil originally formulated during the period of his early anti-Manichean polemic. I maintain that his early thought on sin as *privatio boni* constituted a foundation for his later thought and evolved into a profound ambivalence toward human secular life.³ Through a

¹ Gillian Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982); Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988) chap. 5, “The Politics of Paradise.”

² Peter Iver Kaufman, “Augustine, Evil, and Donatism: Sin and Sanctity before the Pelagian Controversy,” *TS* 51 (1990) 115–26.

³ I choose “ambivalence” over “ambiguity” for several reasons. An old Latin term, ambiguity suggests uncertainty as to whether two or more choices apply, and conveys indecision, multiple meanings, and lack of clarity. Ambivalence is a new term, having found its way into the *Oxford English Dictionary* only in the second edition of 1989. It is a clearer term, for it shows that both of only two choices are valid at the same time. Ambivalence clarifies options, while ambiguity obscures them. In this sense ambivalence is a linguistic dichotomy, because it refers to one thing, and only one thing, seen in two ways. It can be conveyed by comparative and superlative adjectives, as when we say that something is better than something else, we mean that both things are good but unequally so. Turning to superlatives, when we say that something is the best in its class, we also mean that other things in the class are nonetheless good but not supremely so. Here ambivalence can signal a sort of continuum. By contrast, a positive adjective signals the strict polarity of binary opposites. If something is good, its antithesis is bad. I suspect that this scheme conforms to and is confirmed by Augustine’s terminology and meaning.

chronological sketch of his later polemical activities I hope to suggest ways in which Augustine applied his early insights during subsequent controversies regarding Christian social and political life.⁴

MANICHEANISM AND AUGUSTINE

For some nine years beginning around 375, Augustine actively adhered to the Manichean sect. He had become convinced of the pervasiveness and force of the evil that lay within himself, and he sought an explanation for it. He felt torn apart by the chaos in his soul, and the Manicheans promised to enlighten him. In brief and partial compass, Manicheanism was a dualistic sect of Mesopotamian origin founded by a certain Mani in the third century A.D.⁵ It preached an absolute and uncompromising cosmological dualism. Good was everywhere locked in conflict with evil; light contended against darkness; spirit was opposed by evil matter. Good and evil were absolutely separate, with no morally gray areas in between. Presiding over the field of battle were two principles, one good, the other

⁴ Many features of Augustine's thought remained constant throughout his career, but there were stages in their development and application. I maintain that the period of Augustine's major polemical activity against the Manicheans, from 386 to about 400, was formative for his later career. To be sure, he was often involved in several concerns and controversies at the same time: witness his first work against the Donatists, the *Psalmus contra partem Donati* (394). The period from 386 to 400 was not exclusively devoted to combating the Manicheans, nor was his later thought isolated from his positions against them. Indeed, what is so striking about the body of his thought is the interconnections within it, such that, e.g., his theology of evil and his theories of time and memory served as foundations for his thoughts on society. And Augustine could use the same basic argument in a variety of contexts. For purposes of exposition, I divide the period of "anti-Manichean" activity into three parts: 386–c.393, when he first grappled with the problems of society; 393–396, a transitional period; 396–c.400, when he produced his mature syntheses against the Manicheans. Works cannot always be dated too precisely, but the relative order of their appearance is usually certain. I follow the dating given in I. M. Zarb, "Chronologia operum s. Augustini," *Angelicum* 10 (1933) 359–96, 478–512; 11 (1934) 78–91.

⁵ I am especially indebted to Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Late Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Manchester: University Press, 1985), esp. chap. 5. François Decret, *L'Afrique manichéenne: Etude historique et doctrinale* (2 vols. Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1978), shows that Augustine's account of the African Manicheans is fundamentally trustworthy. On recent textual discoveries, see Albert Henrichs, "The Cologne Mani Codex Reconsidered," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 83 (1979) 339–67, and Ludwig Koenen, "Augustine and Manichaeism in Light of the Cologne Mani Codex," *Illinois Classical Studies* 3 (1978) 154–95. On the broader philosophical issues, see Sara Stroumsa and Gedaliahu Stroumsa, "Aspects of Anti-Manichean Polemics in Late Antiquity and under Early Islam," *Harvard Theological Review* 81 (1988) 37–58, and Christopher J. Brunner, "The Ontological Relation between Evil and Existents in Manichean Texts and in Augustine's Interpretation of Manichaeism," in Parviz Morwedge, ed., *Philosophies of Existence Ancient and Medieval* (New York: Fordham University, 1982) 78–95. For the role of Manicheanism in Augustine's life, see P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California, 1967) chaps. 5 and 15, and pp. 394 f.

evil. Manicheans identified the evil principle with the God of the Old Testament, who, as creator of matter and flesh, was the author of evil and responsible for such moral enormities as the whoring, polygamy, lying, and killing by the patriarchs and the prophets. By contrast, the good principle, the Father of Greatness, tended to be linked with the more spiritual God as portrayed in the New Testament, especially in the Pauline epistles. For Manicheans, Christ could not have been incarnate, for then he would, by his very flesh, have been an agent of the powers of darkness. The individual human soul, containing a portion of divine substance, was at war with its body and had to struggle to overcome the flesh through rigorous asceticism. Manichean social structure was simple: there were the elect, who through prayers and asceticism could eventually attain purification; and the auditors, whose task it was to serve the elect until they themselves were fit for further purification. The elect were forbidden to eat meat and to marry, while looser standards of conduct were imposed on auditors. Manicheans refused to participate in political and social life with non-Manicheans, and advocated a doctrinaire pacifism.

As an auditor, Augustine found these teachings and practices congenial to his own psychological state, for they both explained the fleshly desires that were tearing him apart and exculpated him of responsibility for them. But there was a price to be paid for this assurance: Augustine was not master of himself, because of the evil that was in him but independent of him. His resulting struggle toward self-mastery led to his conversion, or reconversion, to Christianity in 386. Upon reading the Neoplatonist works of Plotinus and others, and upon hearing Ambrose's sermons, he came to feel that the Manichean cosmology did not satisfactorily account for evil. Furthermore, the Manicheans rendered the good God, their Father of Greatness, utterly feckless, impotent, and passive. Augustine had need of a stronger God, one who could combine goodness and power.⁶

Upon his conversion, Augustine perceived the need to combat the Manichean myth by what was in effect a difficult two-pronged argument. First, he had to celebrate the goodness and omnipotence of the Christian God, and also the substantial goodness of God's creation *ex nihilo*. Second, he had to analyze the source, force, and locus of evil. Part of his polemical strategy was to make the record of the Old Testament both normative for Christians and consistent with the New Testament. His tactics included the allegorical use of Scripture, such that objective material events pointed to inner spiritual meaning. Against the literalness with which the Manicheans understood their myth, Augustine employed

⁶ Augustine's account of his own story is well known: *Confessions*, esp. 3, 5, and 7; cf. John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine* (London: Longman, 1954, 1980).

a richness of metaphor and analogy that testified to his literary training, and he often argued on several levels of meaning at once. Crucial to his arguments was the distinction, widely useful for him, between objective external events and interior states of mind or soul. Against the absolute Manichean dualism of good versus evil, he invoked comparative adjectives to denote relative good or evil. His thought on the *saeculum*, that morally ambivalent, tentative arena of time and space on earth in which the drama of imperfect humans is played out, was first fashioned in the context of his anti-Manichean polemic.⁷

AUGUSTINE'S ANTI-MANICHEAN THEOLOGY

When Augustine converted in 386, he first articulated his disenchantment with Manicheanism by fastening onto Plotinus. With the aid of Plotinus he was able to see evil as simply the absence of good (*privatio boni*).⁸ The frame of reference by which he mediated this Plotinian insight was a concept of God as omnipotent, supremely good, and immutable. The Christian Scriptures taught him that God created the universe *ex nihilo*, not out of any pre-existing matter. Hence God's creation was good. All things were good by definition, since Augustine simply took it for granted that existence was superior to nonexistence. While not all creatures were equally good, neither great nor minimally good things could exist without God.⁹ Where created goods are defective, they will cease to exist.¹⁰

The notion that qualitative differences or degrees of goodness existed within the created universe enabled Augustine to contest the stark Manichean dichotomy of good and evil. Instead of evil existing independently from and unmixed with good, evil as *privatio boni* was really a defective good, an imperfection, and could not exist apart from goodness. The notion of an evil nature was a contradiction in terms. Augustine's best-known statements of his *privatio boni* argument are found in the

⁷ I borrow the concept of *saeculum* from its cogent elucidation by Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970, 1988) esp. viii, 62 f.

⁸ For the broader outlines of Augustine's controversial use of Plotinus and the Stoics, see Markus, in *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (A. H. Armstrong, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1967) esp. 343–55; Robert J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386–391* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1968); idem, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of the Soul* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1969); Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987) esp. chap. 7; Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages 2* (Leiden: Brill, 1985) chap. 4, esp. pp. 144, 186; J. M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1967).

⁹ *De libero arbitrio* (391–95) 2.17.46.

¹⁰ *De natura boni* (399) 3, 8, 9, 23.

Confessions: things that are corruptible must be good, else they could not be corrupted. Evil cannot be a substance, for then it would be good by definition.¹¹ To the Manicheans who praised the soul and condemned the body, Augustine opposed a kind of sliding scale of values. His last explicitly anti-Manichean work, the *Contra Secundinum* of 399, applied the *privatio boni* argument to human beings. As deficient or imperfect, human nature is a mixture of being and nonbeing, of tending toward nothingness. Thus, when the mind “declines” to the body through defective appetite, it does not become the body but becomes, after a fashion, embodied (*quodam modo corporascit*).¹² If the soul is superior to the body, both are nevertheless good, and the body is not to be censured because of the soul’s superiority.¹³ In other words, evil was not absolute, but rather relative to the good; the two qualities coinhering in creatures could not be separated from one another.

That Augustine in his later years remained faithful to his anti-Manichean denial that evil was an unalloyed substance is shown in his *Enchiridion*, a manual of the Christian faith composed around 423 during the Pelagian controversy. As he put it, “nothing can be evil unless it is something good.” Or, translated a little more freely, “only something good can be evil.”¹⁴ Augustine realized that the statement sounded absurd, but he found it rationally compelling. For him the law of noncontradiction did not apply to the antithesis of good and evil, both of which could exist in the same thing at the same time. Indeed, evil could not exist apart from good; so, even though good could exist without evil, where there was no good, there was no evil either.¹⁵ This line of reasoning allowed

¹¹ *Confessions* (397) 3.7.12, 7.12.18; cf. the earlier (388) *De moribus Manichaeorum* 2.2. 2-3, 2.5.7, and the later *De natura boni* 4, 6.

¹² *Contra Secundinum* 11.

¹³ *Ibid.* 21.

¹⁴ *Enchiridion* 13: “Non igitur potest esse malum, nisi aliquid bonum. Quod cum dici videatur absurde, connexio tamen rationis huius velut inevitabiliter nos compellit hoc dicere.” This is Augustine’s favorite paradox, but it is only a verbal paradox, because good and evil are not properly in opposition, since they are not on the same level of reality (T. A. Lacey, *Nature, Miracle and Sin: A Study of St. Augustine’s Conception of the Natural Order* [London: Longman, Green, 1916] 94).

¹⁵ *Enchiridion* 14; cf. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* 75. More broadly, Karl F. Morrison points out that, for Augustine, paradoxes, not just in thought but also in extramental reality, are not mutually exclusive, and that antitheses are of the “both/and” rather than the “either/or” type: “From Form into Form: Mimesis and Personality in Augustine’s Historical Thought,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 124 (4) (August 1980) 276–94, at 278. For a modern statement of a similar position, applied to the Holocaust, see Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 148: “[T]o safeguard the possibility of truth it is necessary to hold the one moment as the dialectical negation or counterpoise of the other.” Similarly, some recent trends in literary criticism seem obsessed with the problem of binary opposites: Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983) 103, 132 f., 189.

Augustine to see creatures as ranked along a continuum between being and nonbeing, and creation as maintained by an all-encompassing divine order. This notion of the divine order was directed against the cosmological chaos of the Manicheans. Divine order was the standard by which all things were judged, and could not be evaded. In his early thought Augustine felt that an understanding of the divine order could even lead the soul back to God.¹⁶

This first part of Augustine's anti-Manichean strategy demonstrated to his satisfaction the goodness of God's creation, in which seeming natural evils were not really evil after all. Still to be accounted for was the manifest evil in the *saeculum* of human affairs, so he had to explain evil in such a way as to exculpate God from all responsibility for it. For the Manicheans sin was caused by alien and hostile forces within persons, forces linked with but not limited to matter. These forces made people sin out of necessity, so they were not responsible for their thoughts and deeds; rather, the wicked god was. So Augustine came to the conclusion, fateful for his later thought and for the Western theological tradition as well, that the source of sin was to be found in the fall of the created soul, so human beings were wholly responsible for their own vices or defective choices. Flesh was not evil; but the lusts of the flesh that were to be found in the soul were evil.

The *locus classicus* for Augustine's discussion is the *De libero arbitrio*, the first book composed in 389, with the other two books being completed during his priesthood from 391 to 395. There he saw sin as the turning of the soul from eternal to temporal things, with the person becoming subject to these lower things. It was not these things, such as gold and silver, but the voluntary human pursuit of them that constituted evil.¹⁷ The free choice of the will (*liberum arbitrium voluntatis*) given to us by the Creator enables us to turn ourselves to these lesser goods. These temporal things can never be possessed with complete certainty. The perverse soul is subject to them instead of subjecting them to itself.¹⁸ While free choice is a good, it can be used for good or ill; it is a middling good that can choose lower things over higher ones. Providence punishes these defective choices.¹⁹ Unlike the falling of a stone, the fall of the soul is unnatural, but a proper discipline will help reverse this motion.²⁰ Since there is no nature but from God, the motive for turning away from Him, the defective motive of sin, has nothingness as its cause. Since man's fall

¹⁶ *De ordine* (386) 1.9.27. Augustine would later reject this optimism, but would never reject the functioning of divine order itself.

¹⁷ *De libero arbitrio* 1.14.33; cf. *Sermo 50* (392-94) 3.5; *De musica* (390) 6.14.46; *De civitate Dei* 12.7, 14.11.1.

¹⁸ *De libero arbitrio* 1.16.34-35. ¹⁹ *Ibid.* 2.18.48-2.19.53. ²⁰ *Ibid.* 3.1.2.

was spontaneous, he could not raise himself up by his own will, but only by Christ's help.²¹ As thus presented, Augustine's account of sin, whatever its faults, seemed to exclude the Manichean notion of sin as caused by a force external to the soul.

Even in the depths of sin, sinners never completely lost their original wholeness, nor did they lose all order, for the divine law they did not follow nevertheless constrained them.²² Their sins took the form of a perverse imitation of God, and amounted to a kind of apostasy whereby the soul pursued its private concerns to the neglect of God's universal law.²³ On the social level, pride both corrupted government and society, and pointed to the source of their reformation. In wishing to dominate all other things, men were conquered both by other men and by their own vices.²⁴

HUMAN SOCIETY IN AUGUSTINE'S ANTI-MANICHEAN PERIOD

Augustine's earliest views on society, those expressed up to about 393, evidence the conventional optimism of the classical inheritance even in the face of his analysis of sin. Indeed, the notion that sins were corrected by divine providence even reinforced his optimism. The civic virtues were seen as images of the true virtues known only to the wise.²⁵ Only the reasonable few could understand the world beyond this one.²⁶ God's laws were transcribed into wise souls and earthly kingdoms. Augustine gave a brief and conventional summary of social ethics, including a negative version of the Golden Rule. He sketched a picture of the perfect and conscientious ruler, who treats his subjects with care, respect, and modesty, and who avoids the vices of those in power. A person should not seek office until he had become perfect.²⁷ The art of government (*disciplina regendae rei publicae*) was a task to be pursued only by a wise and well-trained person capable of professional detachment.²⁸ At this stage Augustine assumed that preservation of the social order was the province of an able cadre of elite officials, whose efforts would reinforce the natural bond of common law joining all people together. In view of his later thought, this optimistic strand of Augustine's earlier thought appears somewhat shallow, for it does not take the reality of suffering adequately into account. At this point he saw political authority as an essentially benign agency of divine providence, without considering its workings and limitations.

²¹ *Ibid.* 2.20.54.

²² *De musica* 6.11.30.

²³ *Ibid.* 6.13.40, 6.14.48, 6.16.53.

²⁴ *De vera religione* (391) 45.84-85.

²⁵ *Contra Academicos* (386) 3.17.37. Cf. F. Edward Cranz, "The Development of Augustine's Ideas on Society before the Donatist Controversy," *Harvard Theological Review* 47 (1954) 255-316, at 260; Markus, *Saeculum* 78.

²⁶ *De ordine* 1.11.32.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 2.8.25.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 2.20.54.

Augustine would often juggle several diverse strands of thought on an issue. On this issue he detailed a more sober and realistic stand in his survey of temporal laws in the *De libero arbitrio*. Temporal laws concern the external things of this world, such as body, property, liberty from human domination, family, and city. These things are possessed according to that right (*ius*) by which human society and peace are preserved, in so far as is possible (*quanta in his rebus servari potest*).²⁹ There are limits to human law, for it often permits to go unpunished deeds that will later be punished by divine providence, and it tolerates minor misdeeds to avoid greater ones. Its task is to exercise enough coercion to consolidate peace among ignorant people, in so far as their actions can humanly be governed (*quanta possunt per hominem regi*).³⁰

In this analysis of the limits of temporal law, Augustine applied his anti-Manichean stance concerning the incomplete goodness inherent in human affairs. Human law is an imperfect but necessary adjunct to divine law, so all it can hope to achieve is a certain measure of social cohesion appropriate to the sinful human condition.³¹ So important is the bond of law that a valid law can be issued even by an evil ruler.³² Rulers need not be good persons to perform their official functions.³³ And when sinners made wicked by their free choice do not wish to obey the law, the law is fittingly imposed on them.³⁴

What, then, was Augustine's earliest judgment of the prospects of human society? Thus far he had constructed a view that was relatively sanguine, at least when compared to conventional interpretations of his later works. He optimistically saw a comprehensive equilibrium in human affairs. Though necessary, society is of secondary importance. Governments punish the worst expressions of vice and provide a minimal peace and welfare. Truly vicious persons are providentially visited with temporal penalties. Yet, in a kind of intellectual inebriation, Augustine's early treatment of society remained impersonal and detached. In his distant, abstract, and superior perspective he had not gone beyond the commonplace of his classical heritage. Thus an elite few were able to rise from attachment to transient things to intellectual enlightenment, and these should rule. Sin is a serious but not a hopeless impediment to this ascent. Human beings can reverse the free movement away from God and turn again towards Him if they so choose.³⁵ There is an optimism of almost Pollyanna proportions in his descriptions of the operations of

²⁹ *De libero arbitrio* 1.15.32.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 1.5.12–13.

³¹ *Ibid.* 1.15.32; see n. 28 above.

³² *Ibid.* 1.5.12.

³³ *Ibid.* 1.15.31.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 1.16.34; cf. *De musica* 6.11.30, 6.14.48; *De diversis quaestionibus* 83 (388–95) 27; *Enarratio in psalmum 1* (very early) 2.

³⁵ *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* (388–89) 1.36. Characteristically Augustine later modified this optimism with the caution, "praeparatur voluntas a Domino . . . ut possint" (*Retrac-*

order and providence. There were tensions within this optimism, however, for Augustine was becoming aware of the difficulties involved in leading a fully Christian life, due to the force of sinful habit.

Around 393 Augustine began to reflect more seriously on the deeper issues of human sinfulness, in the institutional context of his pastoral work and in the intellectual context of his more thorough study of the Pauline epistles. He sought to reclaim Paul from the Manicheans by developing a hermeneutic that emphasized human moral autonomy and yet preserved the goodness of the Old Testament laws and the gratuitous nature of grace.³⁶ This process culminated in the *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*, the first work written after his elevation to the bishopric of Hippo in 395. Here the intractability of sin crystallized a change in his attitudes. Doubting his earlier optimism, he became convinced that sin was not a mere and simple aversion of the soul from higher to lower goods, but rather a continuing process given momentum by the force of habit (*consuetudo*). Divine grace was needed to reverse this process, and so Christ assumed a new role in his thought. No longer was he merely a teacher and role model, but now also the indispensable means of salvation. In the *De sermone Domini in monte* (394), after repeating that the fall of the soul was uncoerced and would be punished by divine law, he turned to the problem of repeated sins. Through habit the love of sinning became entrenched. Done once, a sin provided a short-run satisfaction that provoked continuing temptation. Such repeated satisfaction became so habitual that the sin could only be overcome with the help of Christ.³⁷ Augustine was beginning to come to grips with the phenomenology of evil.

Through exegesis of the Pauline epistles, Augustine formulated an absolute contrast between the damned and the saved that left behind his earlier notion of a gradual stepwise ascent to moral enlightenment. Now all human beings were sinners. While some were saved by grace, the rest of humanity he deemed a *massa peccati*.³⁸ Human dereliction was so total

tationes 1.10.2). He had already cast some doubt on this optimism as early as *De libero arbitrio* 2.20.54.

³⁶ Cf. Paula Fredriksen (Landes), ed. and tr., *Augustine on Romans* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982) ix; eadem, "Beyond the Body/Soul Dichotomy: Augustine on Paul against the Manichees and the Pelagians," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 23 (1988) 87-114.

³⁷ *De sermone Domini in monte* 1.12.34. On the role of habit, especially sinful habit, see John G. Prendeville, S.J., "The Development of the Idea of Habit in the Thought of Saint Augustine," *Traditio* 28 (1972) 19-99, and Surin's pithy summary: *Theology* 10. Augustine's thought would henceforth be marked by a heightened Christocentrism: Cranz, "Development" 277-79.

³⁸ *Expositio quarundam propositionum ex Epistola apostoli ad Romanos* (394-95) 52; *Expositio Epistolae ad Galatas* (394-95) 23. For how Augustine interpreted and sometimes distorted the Pauline epistles, see Paula Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion

that the image of God was entirely effaced from most souls.³⁹ Augustine stated unequivocally that unaided human powers could not achieve salvation.⁴⁰ Only by the grace of faith could the downward trend be reversed and good works follow.⁴¹

As a result of this intensification of Augustine's sense of sin, he would henceforth have little hope that human societies could achieve higher moral levels. Yet the fact of sin did not prevent human justice from retaining at least some vestiges of divine justice. Divine order and justice still governed human affairs, but now their operations were closed to human understanding.⁴² God, the omnipotent Creator, was seen as imposing His now inscrutable judgments on the *massa peccati*.⁴³

This shift toward the intractability of sin and the resulting need for grace was crucial for Augustine's later career. He had become disenchanted with his earlier cosmic but superficial optimism. This disenchantment took root when he faced up to the logical implications of his anti-Manichean assertion that all creatures were inseparable mixtures of good and evil. Hence no human ruler could escape the flawed goodness of his vitiated nature by becoming perfect, and no purely human society could foster full virtue. No human ruler could act out of good motives unmixed with evil ones. The later antithesis of the two cities, an antithesis at once rhetorical and eschatological, was but one idiom for expressing Augustine's underlying philosophical position. Rather than a relapse into Manicheanism, as some in Augustine's own day and since would have it, this shift represented a further development of the *privatio boni* argument. Since all people were imperfect, no group could become an elite by their own efforts. What good, then, was left for human societies to accomplish, given that they too could never be more than defective goods? They would remain ultimately ambivalent, for "only something good can be evil."

To salvage something for human society was a task Augustine set for himself in works of his later anti-Manichean period, those written from 395 to about 400. He must still place the locus of iniquity, and responsibility for it, in the soul, since therein lay the power of choice. But now he made human ignorance and weakness into consequences of that occult order of punishments established by God's inscrutable judgment of Adam's sin. As a result of the sinful human condition, people acted out

Narratives, Orthodox Traditions and the Retrospective Self," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 37 (1986) 3-34.

³⁹ *De div. quaest.* 83 51.1, 67.4.

⁴⁰ *De div. quaest. ad Simp.* 1.2.22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 1.2.2; cf. the earlier *De Gen. c. Man.* 1.3.6.

⁴² *De div. quaest. ad Simp.* 1.2.16; *De div. quaest.* 83 53.2.

⁴³ *De div. quaest. ad Simp.* 1.2.2.

of a mixture of good and evil motives. Voluntary sins included those that sought, out of foolish benevolence, to seduce others to sin.⁴⁴ This is an example of the oxymorons by which Augustine expressed the complexity of human motivation that results from the divided soul. Even the good Christian, one seemingly headed for salvation, was threatened with pride. Augustine observed that for those like himself who had certain duties within human society (*humanae societatis officia*), there was often a perceived necessity to be either feared or loved, and he was unsure whether he himself could ever completely avoid this temptation of pride.⁴⁵ This autobiographical statement must be seen in the context of his statement shortly before, that in his own eyes he had become a question to himself because of the darkness within.⁴⁶

The Manicheans tried to sunder the teachings of the two Testaments and to jettison those of the Old. Against them Augustine sought to harmonize the seemingly contradictory doctrines, especially in the rambling *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* (397–98), his longest explicitly anti-Manichean work. If, for example, the Mosaic law upheld love of neighbor and hatred of enemy, when Christ came to fulfil that law he commanded that we hate our enemies for the iniquity of their wills, but love them for the goodness of their natures.⁴⁷ Since we should both love and hate one and the same person, Augustine introduced a profound ambivalence into human social relations.

As pacifists, the Manicheans challenged Augustine to justify Moses' wars. In response, he observed that the same act should be judged differently according to its motivation. To justify warfare, Augustine had to interiorize the pacific precepts of the Gospels. Since, he argued, the heart rather than the body was the seat of virtue, Moses was not cruel to avenge a few by the sword, for he was motivated by great love when he inflicted healing discipline. The precept to "turn the other cheek" (Mt 5:39) referred to the inward disposition of the heart (*praeparatio cordis*), not to words and deeds, so that an inward love could legitimate the external physical correction of sinners to prevent their future damnation.⁴⁸ Warfare was licit when it was motivated by a proper love. Thus

⁴⁴ *Contra Secundinum* 17.

⁴⁵ *Confessions* 10.36.58–59. The phrase "humanae societatis officia" occurs earlier (*De moribus ecclesiae* [388] 1.26.49), but there such duties were seen as a consequence of love of neighbor, difficult to perform well, but still shorn of the undertone of grave and inescapable temptation.

⁴⁶ *Confessions* 10.33.50.

⁴⁷ *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 19.24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 22.76, 79. Augustine had earlier advanced similar arguments in less polemical contexts: *De sermone Domini* 1.19.59, 1.20.63; *De mendacio* 15.27. I belabored these issues in a different context in *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1975) 16–18; cf. also Colish, *Stoic Tradition* 2, 217–20.

one and the same action could be either good or bad, depending on its motivation. Even when the Hebrews plundered the Egyptians on divine command, they may have sinned if they were also motivated by a desire for gold.⁴⁹ From this line of reasoning Augustine concluded that one's motives were ambivalent and unknown even to oneself, and in this sort of situation a person acts out of a confused mixture of motives. How much more hidden are the motives of others, except to God?⁵⁰ And, as surely as there are degrees of sin, so also are there degrees of goodness. It is the direction of the will, or the inward disposition, that is crucial for Augustine's analysis of motivation. Mortal appetites are good when they are employed toward preserving the mortal welfare of the individual and the human race, but where these same appetites become intemperate, they are transformed into wicked lusts worthy of correction by affliction.⁵¹

The Augustinian notion of the inward disposition, emblematic of his stance against the Manicheans, was derived from a mixture of Pauline, Neoplatonic and Stoic sources. It served as Augustine's most powerful solvent of human pride and pretension in a great variety of contexts. A person's outward acts might appear praiseworthy, and yet mask a wicked inner motivation. Conversely, seemingly vicious behavior might conceal a loving inward disposition. Only God could ultimately perform the triage.

BEYOND AUGUSTINE'S ANTI-MANICHEAN POLEMIC

By the end of his explicitly anti-Manichean activity Augustine had developed a number of core notions awaiting later elaboration. A partial list of these would include the indefeasible goodness of all creation, including human nature, the free choice of the will and the inevitability of its sinning, with the resulting need for grace, the inward disposition as determinative of a person's moral condition, and the inescapability of divine providence. These core notions served as building blocks for the various edifices of Augustine's later thought. From them stemmed Augustine's profound ambivalence regarding the motives and results of human activity, but, as far as I know, he never denied the fundamental goodness of human nature. Even in his most ill-tempered later diatribes against Pelagius' brightest defender, Julian of Eclanum, he reasserted his conviction that human nature, though vitiated, remained basically good and capable of being healed.⁵² And even in the depths of his secular

⁴⁹ *Contra Faust.* 22.73.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Sermo* 50 (392-94) 2.3; *De mendacio* 17.36; *Contra Secundinum* 17.

⁵¹ *Contra Faust.* 22.29.

⁵² *Opus imperfectum contra Julianum* (429-30) 3.206.

pessimism he never condemned involvement in the world as intrinsically evil. On a more explicitly social level, Augustine concluded that the experience of individuals and societies consisted in the interplay between their ontological goodness and their wilful evil. Their works were good, but imperfectly so, and there were degrees of perfection among them. Human society was necessary both as an earthly analogue of divine order and as a consequence of sin.

These early core notions functioned as parameters of control on his later thought. For example, from them Augustine concluded that there could be no spiritual dualism in this life. No individuals and no groups could claim elite status, or could be denigrated as a pariah group beyond the ordinary boundaries of good and evil. Hence any simplistic, Manichean-like conflict between good and evil was at best nugatory. In its place stood the more troubling, problematical, and realistic conflict of the good versus the good. Since all persons, even the redeemed at some point, were part of the *massa peccati*, they were incapable of becoming perfect by their own unaided efforts. And with all their imperfections, human communities were still valuable and necessary, even for the redeemed. Given the implications of the *privatio boni* argument, no secular utopia was even remotely possible. All individuals needed the external restraints providentially furnished by human institutions. Augustine had defeated the Manichean dualism on the secular level, while leaving something like it intact, in the form of the contrast between the saved and the damned, on the eschatological level.

His anti-Manichean syndrome would serve Augustine well in later life, for he was able to employ it against his other doctrinal foes by seeing in them a common denominator. We must remember that he often combated several groups of adversaries at the same time; there was obviously some overlap in his thoughts. And while we may feel that he unfairly lumped together some rather disparate people and ideas, he tended, with his intellectual *libido dominandi*, to reduce his foes to a united and common enemy. For example, in *Sermon 183*, dated after 416, he was able to lump his polemical adversaries together because they all denied, in one way or another, that Jesus Christ had truly come in the flesh. As I see it, the common denominator of all his foes was that they advanced the possibility of spiritual perfection here below. This is true of the Manichean elect, the Donatist saints, the self-disciplined Pelagians, and the virtuous pagan sages. In order to make the case for this, I will have to tread lightly and quickly through some controversies that remain highly charged.

In the last chapter of his last explicitly anti-Manichean work, Augustine already was setting his sights on the Donatists, for there he viewed the Church on earth as made up of a mixture of a few saints and a

multitude of sinners. The Church functioned as a kind of threshing floor, where in the end the grain would be separated from the chaff.⁵³ The key issue between Donatist and Catholic was separation: Could good persons be separated from wicked ones here below, right now, by competent church prelates? The Donatists claimed that the efficacy of the sacraments depended upon the moral purity of the officiating priest, that some holy persons were able to attain moral purity in this life, and that Donatists could identify these from their outward reputation. For them Christianity was a sect for the already redeemed, for a kind of city of God on earth. Indeed, such physical separation from the Church at large was itself an indicator of sanctity.

Given his episcopal position and his previously expressed refutations of the Manicheans, Augustine found the Donatists to be an easy target on the level of debate. Indeed, it was perhaps too easy for him to recast his arguments against the Manicheans' cosmological dualism into similar ones against the Donatists' moral elitism. Since for him no individual could escape sin entirely, the strict Donatist dichotomy between saints and sinners on earth was without theological foundation. And, given the *privatio boni* argument, there could be no such physical or institutional separation between good and evil here below, but only an eschatological and moral one. Furthermore, given his notions of the problematical self and the moral primacy of the inward disposition, he could exploit the Donatists' claim to be able to discern the spiritual condition of a priest who administered baptism. For Augustine this condition was a quality hidden to human beings, so, whether good or bad, it could have no effect on the recipients of baptism. As men, even clergymen were often mistaken in their judgments. Their baptisms were then a part of their visible ministry, whether they themselves were good or wicked. There was a diversity of merits among ministers. Even among good ministers some were better than others, but their relative moral condition had no bearing on the efficacy of the baptisms they performed. Thus a good baptism could be administered by a bad minister. The recipient of baptism could not judge the righteousness of the pastor, whose good reputation might be devised out of a hidden evil. Consequently the recipient might wrongly see the reputation of the pastor as a guarantee of the efficacy of the sacrament. Against this Donatist perversity Augustine held that God and

⁵³ *Contra Secundinum* 26. At this point Augustine had not settled on his image of the eventual separation of the wheat from the tares, but he already had the concept in mind, for he had even earlier expressed the notion of separation of good from bad in the Church in terms of inward disposition rather than physical space: *Enarratio in psalmum* 8 (very early) 1. For the application of these issues in the Donatist controversy, see Kaufman's "Sin and Sanctity" (n. 2 above) and *Contra Cresconium* (405-6) 3.66.75.

Christ worked the effects of the sacraments.⁵⁴

More broadly, the Donatists' claim to superior sanctity contradicted Augustine's contention that no one was without sin, and provided him with another easy debating point.⁵⁵ It is probably true, as Kaufman points out (122), that Augustine made the puritanism of the Donatists more perfectionist than it actually was. This may be explained, if not pardoned, by Augustine's scorching invective, but it also indicates Augustine's impatience with any position smacking of elite perfectionism. As he saw it, the Donatists' persistence in error was yet another example of the pervasiveness of sin. Their stance that their prelates were competent to judge good and evil was an example of pride and the attempt to usurp God's judgment. Such a stance rendered God powerless, and it was against the Manichean view of an impotent and feckless God that Augustine earlier celebrated divine omnipotence. Long before he took up his verbal cudgel against the Donatists, Augustine had seen heresy as a spiritual vice of the flesh, of love of self warring against the love of God.⁵⁶ Perhaps in frustration, in his last anti-Donatist work, the *Contra Gaudentium*, written in 421 when he was already enmeshed in the Pelagian controversy, Augustine argued that if religious error went unpunished, then even secular crimes could not be punished, since both sorts of crimes proceeded from the evils of the flesh.⁵⁷

Pelagianism confronted Augustine with what appeared to be a very different challenge during the last two decades of his life. The Pelagians claimed at least the theoretical possibility for serious Christians to be saved by their own efforts unaided by grace. In effect, they viewed the Church as a voluntary sect and Christians as endowed with efficacious free will.⁵⁸ To Augustine these claims must have looked very similar to those of the Donatists.⁵⁹ Against the Pelagians he invoked ever more strident arguments for the inevitability of sin even in those who apparently used their reason effectively to control their vices, and for the concomitant need for grace. Aided by his concept of the inward disposition, Augustine plumbed the depths of human sinfulness even in its most obscure reaches. Anyone who claimed the ability not to sin, to be exempted from the *massa peccati*, to be confident of one's own salvation,

⁵⁴ *Contra Cresconium* 2.17.21—2.21.36; 3.5.5—3.9.9; cf. also Kaufman's treatment of these issues, "Sin and Sanctity" 116–18, 120.

⁵⁵ *Contra Cresconium* 2.8.25; Kaufman, "Sin and Sanctity" 125.

⁵⁶ *Expositio Epist. ad Galatas* 46; cf. *Contra Cresconium* 3.66.74.

⁵⁷ *Contra Gaudentium* 1.19.20.

⁵⁸ Cf. Kaufman, "Sin and Sanctity" 125; Pagels, *Adam*, esp. 124–26.

⁵⁹ Augustine even carried over to the Pelagians his justification and practice of imperial coercion invoked against the Donatists: J. Patout Burns, "Augustine's Role in the Imperial Action against Pelagius," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 30 (1979) 67–83.

thereby committed the sin of pride. And so he argued that even those endowed with the free gift of grace were unable to avoid sin entirely. All humanity, including the saints, remained often unwilling members of the *massa peccati*.⁶⁰

Paganism was the intellectual heritage that had nurtured the early Augustine. Like the Pelagians, some pagans had claimed the possibility that through self-control reasonable persons could tame their vices and practice virtue.⁶¹ In Augustine's early euphoria immediately following his conversion, he had felt that the virtues preached by Platonists and Stoics could be realized by the Christian sage.⁶² Having turned from this optimism to pessimism, Augustine came to feel that the pagan claims of perfectibility for the few were obscenely ludicrous. The *City of God against the Pagans* was the result. Throughout that work Augustine demonstrated his ambivalent attitude toward human accomplishment here below, and his awareness of the dilemmas posed by the conflict of the good and the good. Thus he could explain why basically good but imperfect men could fight each other, since they both acted out of a mixture of motives and since each was often torn against himself.⁶³ Even warfare evidenced the conflict between relative goods, and so when a war was won by the juster party, the victor was to be congratulated, and it was worse when the injurious side prevailed over the more righteous side.⁶⁴

While criticisms of human government abound in the *City of God*, one of the most famous and most problematical is Augustine's claim that "without justice what are kingdoms but large bands of thieves? What are bands of thieves but small kingdoms?"⁶⁵ This passage is often taken to mean that brigands and emperors enjoy the same moral status, or to imply a wholesale debasement of human government. I see this sort of interpretation as wide of the mark, given Augustine's ambivalence. On the one hand, Augustine was really praising a well-ordered kingdom, one that sought to maximize the only relative and imperfect justice that is possible here below. The crucial phrase is *remota iustitia* ("without justice"), an ablative absolute suggesting that justice was the crucial

⁶⁰ Cf. *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* (411) 1.9.9, 1.12.15, 2.7.8, 3.4.8; cf. Kaufman, "Sin and Sanctity" 125.

⁶¹ Cf. Pagels, *Adam* 112 f.

⁶² Cf. Markus, *Saeculum* 67, 87 f.

⁶³ *City of God* 15.5; cf. Pagels, *Adam* 113.

⁶⁴ *City of God* 4.15, 15.4. Note the comparative adjectives; cf. Russell, *Just War* 21.

⁶⁵ *City of God* 4.4. The chapter concerns a supposed encounter between Alexander the Great and a pirate as related by Cicero, *De republica* 3.14. The totally negative view of conquering rulers is found in Seneca, *Quaestiones naturales* 3, praef. 5, but Augustine's view was more nuanced.

attribute of a kingdom, one that set it on a higher moral plane than a robber band. On the other hand, Augustine was also suggesting here that no earthly kingdom could be perfectly just. Every kingdom was bound to be at least a little disordered, a little unjust, like a robber band at least in that way. Augustine wished to exclude any necessarily illusory utopianism from human hope here below. Even with his full complement of secular pessimism, Augustine was not advocating cruel and arbitrary rule, for he knew well how wicked motives could vitiate an otherwise well-governed state. Even a good ruler would be fallible—witness Augustine's treatment of the judge who, though conscientious, nevertheless delivered erroneous sentences.⁶⁶ Augustine was well aware that good intentions did not always yield happy results, that frustration in politics was inevitable, and that evil men might rule.⁶⁷ But for him human society was no Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*, and earthly government no Hobbesian Leviathan. Power without justice would be ineffective in ruling turbulent human societies.

CONCLUSIONS

Augustine wrestled his whole life with the problems of evil, with what later would be called theodicy. Adhering to his early view of evil as *privatio boni*, he nevertheless had the difficult task of explaining how an essentially negative quality could wreak such havoc in human affairs. He found his solution in the rational will of creatures who had fallen away from the good. As divine creations, they had certain powers which, bent to evil purposes, could endow evil with effective force, could transform its negativity into a positive "something."⁶⁸

Realizing the difficulties of expressing this notion, Augustine sought numerous ways to explain it to his contemporaries, with mixed success.

⁶⁶ *City of God* 19.6

⁶⁷ Pagels, *Adam* 114, is right to insist that for Augustine sin necessitated political rule. Yet she tacitly assumes (e.g., 113) that such political rule will necessarily be despotic and that Augustine found despotic rule acceptable and even desirable. Her assumptions overlook the differences between normative and descriptive modes of discourse. She also overlooks the distinction between tyrannical and paternalistic authority. If political authority arises from sin, this does not justify sinfulness in its exercise. Of Augustine's traditional, genuine, and deeply felt paternalism, with all its attendant problems, there can be no doubt, and we must be careful to judge him on his own terms. His clear preference was for rulers to treat their subjects with the care, concern, and respect that was exemplified in the paternalistic Roman ideal of *paterfamilias* (*De ordine* 2.8.25). As he saw it, *paterfamilias* was a burden imposed by the natural order and should guide the ruler's dealings with his subjects (*City of God* 19.16, 19.14). He warned rulers that pride would harm their rule (*ibid.* 19.15). The most famous praise of a ruler in that work is Augustine's eulogy of the Emperor Theodosius, who was exemplary for ruling the Empire in the spirit of *paterfamilias* (*ibid.* 5.26). For the background to this complex issue, see Markus, *Saeculum* 197–210.

⁶⁸ Cf. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* 99; O'Connell, *Odyssey of the Soul* 146.

One of these ways was to analyze the consequences of his view of evil for life in human society. This view helped lead him to reject in all its forms the shallow optimism he had inherited from pagan antiquity.⁶⁹ He was aware that such fragile optimism could turn into abysmal pessimism almost overnight. To illustrate this, one need go no farther than to compare him with his mentor Ambrose, who saw the Roman Empire and the Christian Church as conjoint agencies of salvation. For Ambrose the invasions of the Empire were caused by divine indignation against heresy.⁷⁰ *Fides romana* and *fides catholica* were coextensive and mutually interdependent. Should the amalgam disintegrate, the whole world would end.⁷¹ Augustine emancipated Christianity from the unstable amalgam of the Roman yoke by pursuing a kind of middle way, the way of ambivalence, between earlier Christians who had seen themselves as a righteous but persecuted sect beset by a wicked Rome, and the Eusebian (and Ambrosian) apotheosis of the Roman Empire.

Augustine's secular pessimism is often attributed to his ill-tempered old age, to the collapse of the Roman world as he knew it, and to the Pelagian controversy, but these are only part of the explanation. In the battle with Julian of Eclanum, Augustine saw his whole life's work put at risk by the claim that some human beings were capable of not sinning. If, as Pagels concludes, Augustine invoked original sin to deny all hope of political freedom and individual self-determination, he did not do so for purely personal, political, or even theological reasons, but out of a long and agonizing philosophical reflection on the problem of evil, even if his conclusions remain highly debatable. As a result, he denied any politics of perfection and, after first cutting his eyeteeth on the pretensions of the Manichean elect, he went on to oppose successive waves of elitist perfectionists. His orientation stands in opposition to all forms of perfectionist rhetoric whether ancient or modern. For the ancients, political felicity depended on elevating the right persons into high political office.⁷² Augustine showed on both metaphysical and anthropological grounds why such a view was both naive and impossible.⁷³ All would not be right even if the proper persons ruled and subjects obeyed the rules.

There are also broader heuristic implications of what might be called Augustine's anti-Manichean syndrome. Taken as a whole, it served him as a kind of base line or parameter of control for the later development

⁶⁹ Cf. Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine" 26.

⁷⁰ *De fide christiana* 2.16.136-43.

⁷¹ *Expositio in Lucam* 11.10; cf. Russell, *Just War* 14.

⁷² Commenting on an earlier version of this article, Henry Chadwick offered this insight, which I hope I paraphrase faithfully.

⁷³ In the *City of God* he vigorously rejected his earlier contention (*De ordine* 2.8.25; see above, at n. 27) that the ruler should be perfect.

of his thought. This syndrome also has the hermeneutic value of helping us to see Augustine's thought in its fulness, shorn of attempts to flatten his thought into a system of dogmatic propositions. It may also help us to see to what extent his earlier positions prefigured his later thought, to gauge more accurately where and how his thought changed as he changed, and to locate both consistencies and tensions within it. For example, did the old Augustine suffer a relapse into Manicheanism, as Julian and others claimed? Using the anti-Manichean syndrome as a hermeneutic tool might bring a fresh perspective to this perennial debate. While these are offered as suggestions rather than demonstrations, it should be abundantly clear that Augustine's arguments against the Manicheans, with all the contingency of their genesis, have cast a long shadow indeed.