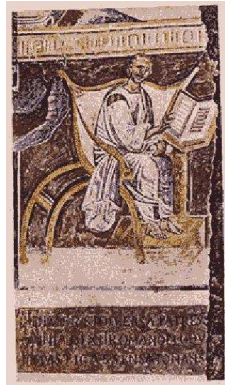


The Problem of Evil, Manicheans, St Augustine

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper will to examine the problem of evil, the Manicheans, And St Augustine. The first part of the paper will examine what is commonly called the “The Problem of Evil” and how a group of Christian heretics known as the Manicheans dealt with this problem during the early part of the middle ages. Included in this part will be some background historical information on the time period in general and the Manicheans specifically. The second part of this paper will deal with St. Augustine’s rejection of the Manichean solution and an answer of his own to the problem of evil. The third part of the paper will attempt to answer the question of whether on not St Augustine’s answer was a good one, given the political and social climate of the time.

Part 1

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil that confronted Augustine and other Christians at the time was this: If God is all powerful and good and all things that emanate from God are good, then how could evil exist in the world? According Augustine, God is omniscient, omnipotent, and morally good. This is the standard view of God and as such has some difficulties with regard to evil. Firstly, if God is omniscient he would know where and when evil was happening. Secondly if God is omnipotent then he has the power to stop evil. Lastly, if God is morally good, it is incumbent of good to dispel evil, God being the ultimate essence

of good. The only this is, evil exists. This leads to the argument that provides the basis for arguments against God, either God doesn't have the power to eliminate all evil, or doesn't know when evil exists, or doesn't have the desire to eliminate all evil. (5), Hence there is no God.

The Manicheans and their Solution

Manichaeism was a dualistic religion founded in the third century AD by a Persian sage named Mani, Mani attempted to synthesize Christian, Buddhist and Zoroastrian elements into his religion. From the Christians, he found the Jesus was representative of the highest ideals of life in service to God. From the Buddhists he gained his ethical background in the lessons on how to live your life which should be followed by all everyone at all times. From the Zoroastrians, he took the doctrine of the fundamental struggle between Spirit and Matter as the basis for the solution of the problem of Good and Evil. (6)

He taught that there were two gods, one good, and one evil. The good god is the god of spirituality and light; the bad god (Satan) is the god of matter and darkness, both equally eternal and powerful. They are the essence of creation and destruction. The good god is also responsible for human souls and minds, the bad god for human bodies, passions and emotions. Humans are the battleground between the two gods, since they blend mind and matter, the basic elements of the two gods. (4)

The world seen by human eyes was the battleground for their cosmic conflict. The Manicheans and their followers were the few who were on the side of the good spirit and who would be rewarded for their allegiance with eternal bliss. In the meantime all sorts of

misfortune might befall the individual, but none of the wicked things he found himself doing were his fault. If the devil does compel sin, then guilt does not ensue. (2)

Manichaeism developed a very straightforward explanation for the existence of evil, one that was at the heart of the religion. Evil existed because of Satan, and existed in humans because the elements of light and darkness were unnaturally mixed in human beings. This is reflected in their cosmology which has three ages. The first age was a time when light and dark were separated. The second age was when Darkness penetrated the divide, stole the souls of mankind and started the war. The Third age will come when the light overcomes the dark. The ultimate goal of existence then was to keep the light and the darkness finally separated. (4)

Part 2

Augustine and the Manicheans

Augustine, as a young man was sent to Carthage to study. It was there that he fell in with the Manicheans. "He was torn between the conventional pleasures of adolescence and the conventional rigors of philosophy." In this he led a very worldly life, and by his own admission partook in sinful behavior. However try as he might, he was never quite able to get a grip on his proclivities. For a student philosopher preoccupied with the problem of evil and a guilty conscience, this was too frustrating to bear. Enter the Manicheans with some easy answers. They told Augustine that he was not to blame for the way he felt, was only a tool in the great war between light and dark and that his sinful behavior is because

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Satan is making him do it and it's not really his fault. If you were lucky enough to fall in with the Manicheans and smart enough to become a member of "the inner circle, you could get to heaven. "Security could be had without sacrifice, and guilt removed without atonement." (2)

Even though Augustine was considered a Manichean for many years, he was too smart compared the other disciples of his faith and began to poke holes and ask lots of questions. Unfortunately for him they were unable to provide anyone who could answer some of his questions. He writes in *Confessions*, that he became disenchanted with the inability of his fellow Manicheans to "provide sufficiently detailed and rigorous explanations of their cosmology".(3) Unable to placate Augustine, they summon what they consider to be their wisest sage, a man named Faustus. This was they man who would finally answer all the troubling questions Augustine had. However, it turns out that Faustus, while an entertaining speaker who knew his lines well, was not nearly as educated as Augustine and was unable to keep up with the questions let alone provide any meaningful answers beyond vague Manichean dogma. It was his long association with the Manicheans that gave him the ability to discredit them in public and much of his early work is reflective of this. (2)

Augustine's Answer to the Problem of Evil

According to Plotinus, The One is all good. If everything that comes from the One is all good. How could evil exist? -Evil does not exist, Evil is the absence of Good (The One). This concept, coupled with other insights of the Platonists, made it possible for Augustine to conceive of the possibility of a non-physical substance [*Confessions* VII.x.16]. This is

one of the keys Augustine needed in understanding the “Problem of Evil.” It allowed him to differentiate between the different kinds of evil. He advanced the concept of Natural evil and Moral evil. Natural evils are only the things that appear evil, such as an earthquake flood or war. They only appear to be evil because we, as humans are governed by our own self interest, have a limited perspective and are unable to see “the big picture” of God’s unfolding drama. So, when viewed in the context of God’s larger plan, natural evils are not evil at all [*Confessions* VII.xiii.19 and *De Civitate Dei* XI.22].

Moral evil on the other hand, is the product of human action. These are the culpable products of a will that has become attached to lower or worldly things and ideals, treating them as if they were higher. Moral evil is, strictly speaking, not a thing, but only the will's turning away from God and attaching itself to inferior ideals as if they were higher. In *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine emphasizes the privative nature of evil by referring to the will's pursuit of inferior ideals as being a deficient rather than efficient cause. (3)

Part 3

Was St Augustine’s answer good or good enough?

When considering this question, one has to consider the context of the situation. For the Manichean’s his answers were not good, they attacked the core of their ideas with a precision only someone intimately familiar with their beliefs could possess. For the Church however, his answers and ideas were very good. They provided the intellectual ammunition

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the church needed to defend itself from the heresies being promulgated within the church, and from rival religions from other cultures.

When Augustine began to write about the Manicheans and dispute their views there are three concepts upon which he will focus:

1. Their implicit materialism (shared by the Greeks with the exception of the Neo-Platonists) and lack of concern for worldly sin. The Manicheans considered severe Asceticism to be the path to enlightenment, and that if you sinned it was ok as long as you made up for it by some other worldly deprivation later.
2. Their substantive dualism whereby Satan and God (good/evil, light/dark), are equivalent, co-eternal entities. This was obviously a problem as the Council at Nicea had decided that there was only one God and he was all powerful. It would not do to have two gods as that would invalidate God's omnipotence.
3. Their concept of the human soul as a fragmented element of the Light, a trapped splinter of God so to speak.

This last was especially troubling because taken to its logical end it would mean that the soul is a part of God and as such would make it divine. This would eliminate the important distinction between creator and created. Additionally, it would diminish the culpability of an individual human soul for the commission of morally bad actions. Taken with their materialism, it allowed the Manicheans to shift the blame for sin to the body in which the soul is trapped.

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Augustine's answer, by removing the necessity of Satan as a causative force, renders the rest of the arguments invalid. Like all good debaters he wins by removing the very premise that the opposition's argument is based on. "God, being supremely real, is supremely good. God's creatures, being in varying degrees less real than God, are in corresponding degrees less good. Their so-called evil is simply the absence of goodness and reality; it is the inevitable consequence of their status as creature."⁽⁷⁾ Additionally, (natural) evil is the result of a deficiency in humans, more specifically, our lack of knowledge of God's plan. This is demonstrated by this passage from *City of God*:

"And thus divine providence admonishes us not to foolishly vituperate things, but to investigate their utility with care; and, where our mental capacity is or infirmity is at fault, to believe that there is a utility, though hidden, as we have experienced that there were other things which we all but failed to discover. For this concealment of the use of things is itself either an exercise of our humility or a leveling of our pride; for no nature at all is evil, and this is a name for nothing but the want of good."

While this view is not without its flaws and was roundly ridiculed in Voltaire's *Candide*, in the hands of Augustine, it proved to be the kind of thinking that would eventually aid in discrediting the Manichean viewpoint.

Appendices

Image on Title Cover is the oldest surviving image of Augustine, from the 6th century AD at the Lateran in Rome. (1)

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