

# AUGUSTINE, THE MANICHAEAN AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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“Per tempus annorum novem Augustinus apud Manichaeos permansit.”<sup>1</sup>

## 1.0 Is there a Problem of Evil?

Over twenty-two hundred years ago, Epicurus (341–270 B.C.) superlatively enunciated one of the most irreconcilable enigmas facing “Man’s speculative intellect and moral consciousness, the problem of evil.”<sup>2</sup> He states: “The gods can either take away evil from the world and will not, or, being willing to do so, cannot; or they neither can nor will, or lastly they are both able and willing. If they have the will to remove evil and cannot, then they are not omnipotent. If they can, but will not, then they are not benevolent. If they are neither able nor willing, then they are neither omnipotent nor benevolent. Lastly, if they are both willing and able to annihilate evil, how does it exist?”<sup>3</sup>

The genesis of the problem of evil lies in the apparent incompatibility in jointly asserting the following statements:

- (1) God exists;
- (2) God is good;
- (3) God is omnipotent;
- (4) God is omniscient;
- (5) Evil exists in the world.

The now traditional problem of evil can be postulated in one of several ways. The problem arises from asserting that

God exists, that God is good, and that *any* evil exists. One can likewise assert that God exists, that God is good, omnipotent and omniscient, and that *any* evil exists. The problem of evil again ensues.

Secondly, several thinkers were confounded when they found themselves incapable of explaining how a “good, knowing and powerful God would create or allow not just *any* evil, but the various types or amounts of evil that the world actually contains.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the problem of evil can also be formulated by asserting that God exists, that God is good, omnipotent and omniscient, together with the fact that certain “types or amounts of evil”, can be seen to exist and not just “*any* evil”.

The problem of evil, which for several philosophers has provided strong and “perhaps decisive evidence against belief in God”,<sup>5</sup> is a logical problem arising from an attempt at “clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs”.<sup>6</sup> These beliefs are based on the terms “good”, “evil”, “omnipotent” and “omniscient”, and on the fact that good is always diametrically opposed to evil, in such a way that something good “always eliminates evil as far as it can”<sup>7</sup> and the doings of an omnipotent being are unbounded and unrestricted. Hence, a good omnipotent being eradicates evil entirely. Consequently, a gross incompatibility arises when asserting that a good omnipotent being exists and that evil exists.<sup>8</sup>

The existence of evil, both in the world and within Man, puts to test, according to Dewey J. Hoitenga, “our fundamental conceptions of good and evil, freedom and causation, the divine and the human.”

This is what it did in Augustine.

### 1.1 Elements of Manichaeism

Today, Manichaeism is regarded as a complex dualistic

religion, essentially gnostic in character. In Augustine's time, it was considered to be a Christian heresy. The founder of Manichaeism was Manes (or Mani), a fanatic, who considered himself the Paraclete. He died in Persia in 277. Manes did not entirely reject Christianity, but since he held that its teaching was in several ways false or erroneous, he "supplemented" it by borrowing from other religions and spicing it with his own ideas.

The fundamental doctrine of Manichaeism is the dualistic conception of the structure of the world. In other words, the predominant characteristic of this doctrine is a radical duality and opposition, as for example, between Light and Darkness and between Good and Evil. Light resides in knowledge, revelation, the soul, the heavens, repose and endurance, that is, the Good; whilst Darkness resides in ignorance, matter, the body and unrest, briefly, the Evil.

The forces of evil, according to Manichaean doctrine, had invaded the kingdom of the Good and in part captured it, so that the two became mixed. Matter was therefore partly good and partly evil in composition, both forces being present to a greater or lesser degree in a given substance. Good and evil therefore existed in permanent contrariety because the captive particles of good (or light) were in perpetual contest or tussle to flee from the evil (or darkness) which surrounded them.

The above is the revealed dualistic gnosis. Other elements of Manichaeism include totalitarian gnosis embracing all knowledge; living gnosis portrayed in myths; perfect gnosis which is oriented towards eschatology; and practical-missionary gnosis which concerns the struggles between negative morality and positive morality in each man.

The Manichaeans had an organized church, comprised of the *Elect* and the *Auditors* (or Catechumens), the latter being

more numerous and having a less strict moral code to adhere to. Moreover, the life of the Auditors of whom Augustine was one, was not free from the forces of evil.

### 1.2 Augustine the Manichaeian (373–382)

Having read Cicero's *Hortensius* (an invitation to philosophy), Augustine was, as if, spell-bound by the ideal of wisdom.<sup>10</sup> He attempted to read the Sacred Scriptures, "that I might see what they were."<sup>11</sup> However, the literary style, he says, served only to repulse him, and he quickly abandoned this attempt. It was at this point that Augustine was, I might say, magnetized to Manichaeism. He states: "Therefore I fell among men proudly doting ... in whose mouths were the snares of the Devil ... [and who] cried out 'Truth, Truth', and spoke much thereof to me, yet it was not in them."<sup>12</sup>

It seems quite incredible in a sense, that a man of Augustine's genius and intellectual calibre could have been so well infatuated and carried away by certain elements of Manichaeian doctrine. Why was Augustine, then, so strongly attracted to Manichaeism? It is highly probable that the Manichaeian explanation of the problem of evil, coupled with his inexperience and lack of knowledge of God and His attributes, convinced him and set his mind at rest – though for a short time only. Augustine joined the sect and remained with them for nine years. All his intellectual hopes and ideals, he deposited in Manichaeism, from which he now sought revelation and illumination.<sup>13</sup>

The Manichaeians boasted that the Christian truths which formed part of their doctrine could be proved by reason. They seemed to promise Augustine a road to understanding God by the use of reason. After all, he was an intelligent person and a profound man. Besides, the subtle use of the



intellect appealed to him. He was indeed determined to find the "open and pure Truth."<sup>14</sup> His aversion to Sacred Scripture pleased the Manichaeans who themselves enjoyed mocking the Book.<sup>15</sup> Intelligent, yet inexperienced; impatient, yet willing to make great strides in his impassionate odyssey for the Truth, Augustine was still perturbed by the genesis, existence and implications of evil in the world. In the *Confessiones* Augustine's questions on evil and its origins are recurring. So is his introspection on past events and experiences of his youth "according to the level of knowledge and spirituality he had gained at every step."<sup>16</sup>

The Manichaeans did not try to put the problem of evil aside, a factor which certainly kept Augustine within their clutches. Indeed by their furnishing a "corner" for evil in their myth-saturated universe, they made it a fundamental principle in their mode of thought. Augustine, at one time, came very close to accepting the fact that evil could influence God. In fact, it was, for Augustine, a "shocking and detestable profanity that the wedge of darkness sunders the very nature of God."<sup>17</sup>

Amidst the various Manichaean manuscripts, the *Manichaean Psalmbook* was certainly instrumental in setting Augustine's roots deep into Manichaean soil. Certain *Psalms*, besides being highly reminiscent of those in Sacred Scripture, served to bring the problem of evil back to the surface of Augustine's mind: "The radiance of God shines both on the evil and on the good. (*Psalm 239*) The evil body of the Enemy I have cast away from me, the abode of Darkness that is full of fear. (*Psalm 247*)"<sup>15</sup>

Part of the Manichaean religious experience for the Auditors included a satiation with light, this illumination aiding the individual to differentiate between the good residing in him (this being present in the soul) and the

forces of evil lashing him, and coming from passions and concupiscence. The borderline between the good and evil was therefore that between the material and the spiritual. Augustine, now a Manichaean Auditor, started to uphold the fact that nothing but good could come from God. He began to visualize the existence of an opposing and independent principle to the good. This evil force, Augustine envisaged as perpetually encroaching the good, attempting to drive the borderline further by surrounding and suffocating it. As described previously, evil and its forces cannot bring about any change in what is by nature good, but it can barrage it from all sides and offer it hurdles and drag.

This came to trouble the perturbed Augustine for the soul has a share in the "vast and bright body ... of the Lord God",<sup>19</sup> and is simultaneously sieged and battered by the body and its cravings. Manichaean *Psalm 223* states that evil is to be curbed in order to prevent it from restraining the good: and Augustine agreed with this.

It was during this period that Augustine started to envisage evil as "a kind of substance",<sup>20</sup> "not derived from ... God."<sup>21</sup> He conceived this substance (*substantia*) as "foul, [and] hideous"<sup>22</sup> and "contrary to nature."<sup>23</sup> It is one kind of being among others; it is an iniquitous essence. Evil is that which is hurtful and corrupt.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it is the opposite of the other or good substance. The next step ensues automatically: God, the Good, could not have been the creator of this intrinsically evil reality. Such reasoning would have led Augustine to hold God's power to be restricted: "I [would be] ... constrained to confess Thee bounded."<sup>25</sup>

Good and evil are two opposing elements. The crux of Augustine's thought at this point is his acceptance of the fact that evil could never have come from God. Once more, Augustine is at a loss. "Wallowing in the mire of that deep

pit”,<sup>26</sup> he feels unable to make heads or tails of the problem of evil and the Manichaean delusions.<sup>27</sup> Augustine feels utterly entangled.

He speaks of the “knots of cunning calumnies”<sup>28</sup> and asks: “Who can disentangle this most twisted and intricate knottiness?” (*Quis exaperit istam tortuosissimam et implicatissimam nodositatem?*)<sup>29</sup> While he reflects on his wanderings and past experience, Augustine envisages his “steering off course” and “abandonment of direction”. The knot becomes a tangle, he states metaphorically, and finally a hopeless tangle ensues. The degree to which evil has influenced and considerably altered the course of the good can be gauged from the degree of the *nodositas* attained.

The Light (*sic!*) of Manes, the Paraclete in Augustine, started to flicker.

### 1.3 Augustine’s Rejection of Manichaeism

Even during the enthusiasm of the initial period with the Manichaeans, Augustine had felt perturbed and was never fully gratified by their teachings and by their “solutions” to the problem of evil, even though their dualistic explanation on the latter considerably affected him for a not insignificant span of time.<sup>30</sup> His restive mind kept looking for an answer to the mysteries of the natural world around him. Augustine criticizes Manes, making reference to his “sacrilegious presumption ... seeing he delivered things which not only he knew not, but which were falsified.”<sup>31</sup>

Augustine was also disconcerted by the void he encountered in the Manichaean philosophy. He states that the Manichaeans “tore everything down and were unable to construct anything in its place.”<sup>32</sup> The Manichaeans also showed themselves to be poor in debate with the Catholics. When confronted with Sacred Scripture, “the Manichaeans’

answer whereto seemed to be weak.”<sup>33</sup> They shunned public debates and “falsified the Scriptures.”<sup>34</sup> Augustine was also scandalized by the immoral behaviour of certain members of the Manichaean Elect, who pretended to lead devout and austere lives. This hypocrisy helped to build up further Augustine’s resentment towards the Manichaeans.<sup>35</sup>

When confronted with certain doctrinal problems, as well as dilemmas regarding natural science, Augustine was told that Faustus of Milevis, a leading Manichaean figure, would be able to decipher several of his enigmas. Faustus arrived in Carthage in 382. Augustine was dismayed when “in the assembly of his [Faustus’] auditors, I was not allowed to put in and communicate those questions that troubled me.”<sup>36</sup>

Augustine was disappointed<sup>37</sup> when he found Faustus to be “ignorant of those arts in which I thought he excelled”,<sup>38</sup> for he turned out to be a popular orator, alien to all scientific learning. I am more than sure that Faustus left Augustine’s questions on the problem of evil unanswered. Evil remained, for Augustine, the “real, ineradicable”<sup>39</sup> power it had always been for him.

Although Augustine did not immediately break with the Manichaeans, he decided to abandon their teachings until the advent of some new teaching which could direct him to better waters. Augustine’s Manichaean connection had been a period whereby the “towering genius” of this “*summus vir*”<sup>41</sup> came in contact with an authentic metaphysical preoccupation concerning the character of evil. However, Augustine’s knot on the problem of evil remained tangled<sup>42</sup> and, certainly, Gordian in nature.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

The change which was to shake Augustine was to take place in Milan, “his Damascus”.<sup>43</sup> It is a journey, not only



from Tagaste to Carthage to Rome to Milan, nor is it a journey from childhood to maturity; it is, above all, a journey towards the zenith and towards the nadir of the philosophy of a profound man. It is a journey which ends with the following sentiments in a man's dialogue with God: "I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you; you touched me, and I have burned for your peace."<sup>44</sup>

1. Trapè, A., *Conversio Sancti Augustini* (Oratorio in three parts), Maltese Augustinian Province, 1986, Part 1, p. 8.
2. Betty, L. S., "Aurobindo's Concept of Lila and the Problem of Evil", *International Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1976), p. 315.
3. Evans, B., (ed.), *Dictionary of Quotations*, Delacorte Press, New York, 1968, p. 209.
4. Inati, S. C., "An Examination of Ibn Sina's Theodicy: Dissolving the Problem of Evil", *The New Scholasticism* 58 (1984), p. 171.
5. Hitterdale, L., "The Problem of Evil and the Subjectivity of Values are Incompatible", *International Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (1978), p. 467.
6. Mackie, J. L., "Evil and Omnipotence", *Mind* 64 (1955), p. 200.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
8. Cfr. Springsted, E. O., "Is There a Problem with the Problem of Evil?", *International Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (1984), p. 303.
9. Hoitenga, D. J., "Logic and the Problem of Evil", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1967), p. 114.
10. "... la lettura spirituale di questo libro lo accese di un desiderio ardente di possedere la sapienza ..." (Lupi, J., "La Crisi Spirituale di Sant'Agostino" I, *Melita Theologica* 4 (1951), p. 90).

11. *Conf.* 3, 5, 9.
12. *Conf.* 3, 6, 10; *cfr. De Utilitate credendi* 1, 2.
13. *Cfr. De beata vita* 1, 4.
14. *De utilitate credendi*, 2.
15. “Inoltre le accuse che i Manichei muovevano ... contro tutto il Vecchio Testamento, avevano impressionato Agostino.” (Lupi, J. *art. cit.*, p. 92).
16. Gatt, H., “Augustine’s March to Peace and Happiness”, *Augustinian Panorama* 1 (1984), p. 1.
17. *Contra epistulam quam vocant Fundamenti* 24, 26.
18. Allberry, C. R. C. (ed.), *A Manichaean Psalmbook* (Part II), (Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection, Vol. II), 1938.
19. *Conf.* 4, 16, 31.
20. *Conf.* 5, 10, 20; *cfr. De moribus Manichaeorum* 2, 2.
21. *Conf.* 4, 15, 24.
22. *Conf.* 5, 10, 20.
23. *De moribus Manichaeorum* 2, 2.
24. *Cfr. De moribus Manichaeorum* 3, 5; 5, 7.
25. *Conf.* 5, 10, 20.
26. *Conf.* 3, 11, 20.
27. *Conf.* 5, 13, 23.
28. *Conf.* 6, 3, 4.
29. *Conf.* 2, 10, 18.
30. “... la spiegazione dualistica dell’origine del male – che però influí molto sul pensiero di Agostino nel tempo della sua crisi spirituale ...” (Lupi, J., *art. cit.*, p. 97).
31. *Conf.* 5, 5, 8
32. *De utilitate credendi* 1, 2.
33. *Conf.* 5, 11, 21.
34. *De utilitate credendi* 1, 7.
35. *Cfr. De moribus Manichaeorum* 9, 18 – 11, 20; 18, 65 – 20, 75.

36. *Conf.* 5, 6, 11.
37. "Ma l'incontro con Fausto atteso per nove anni lo disappuntò." (Lupi, J., "La crisi spirituale di Sant'Agostino" II, *Melita Theologica* 5 (1952), p. 31).
38. *Conf.* 5, 7, 12.
39. Schlesinger, G., "The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Suffering", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964), p. 247.
40. Pius XI, *Ad Salutem Humani Generis*, 5.
41. Paul VI, Homily at Canonization ceremony of the Ugandan martyrs, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 56 (1964), p. 905.
42. *Conf.* 2, 10, 18.
43. "... Milano, 'la sua Damasco' ..." (Mucci, G., "Sant'Agostino: Due Centenari e un Libro", *La Civiltà Cattolica* 137, III (1986), p. 50).
44. *Conf.* 10, 27, 38.