

# THE UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTION OF EVIL

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## PROMPT

In the *Confessions*, Augustine considers the nature and source of evil in the world. Present the argument of VII.12-13. First explain how Augustine understands the relationship between good, existence, corruption, and evil. Then, explain how God-as-creator fits into this discussion. For example: does Augustine think that God created anything evil? Finally, explain how Augustine responds to the problem of evil: where does it come from, in the end? Then, consider an objection and explain why the objection causes problems for his argument about the nature and source of evil, either in your own voice or on behalf of some imagined critic of Augustine. Offer a reply on behalf of Augustine, showing how he might respond to this objection based on the text. End by explaining to your reader why Augustine's question is an important one to ask and why his argumentative strategy is an important one to pursue, even if it falls short in the end.

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In the seventh book of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, the source and nature of evil are examined in the hopes of discovering how evil can exist if everything that God created is good. Specifically in Chapters 12 and 13, Augustine discusses the relationship between good, evil, existence, and corruption. He comes to the conclusion that evil is not a substance, rather that evil is the absence of good; he further concludes that everything in the world possesses some form of good, no matter how corrupt it might be. Though Augustine's argument makes sense, it raises the question of his claim about whether universal goodness can still hold true for even the most evil of things.

Augustine begins his argument in Chapter 12 by examining the relationship between good, corruption, and existence. According to Augustine, all things that suffer corruption are good, for the reason

that something cannot be corrupted unless it was already good—in other words, if something was not good, then there would be nothing within that substance to corrupt. Augustine further explains that corrupted things must have some goodness within them, because corruption damages a substance, and a substance is not damaged unless it loses some good. Take for example a car with a flat tire. The car has been corrupted in that it cannot be driven anymore, and this corruption occurred by the loss of the “good” that was present in the tire before it was flat—if corruption did not damage some good, then it would have no effect on the car. Augustine describes this phenomenon as such “Therefore, either corruption damages nothing, and this cannot be, or whatever suffers corruption is deprived of some good.”<sup>1</sup> If, as Augustine claims, corruption is the loss of some good within a substance, it would follow that something that is void of all good would cease to exist. This is exactly what Augustine proposes following the assertion that corruption is a loss of good. He makes this claim because if corruption is the loss of some good, then the complete corruption of something would result in it having no good and thus no substance. Let us return to the analogy of the car. If now the car was reduced to scrap metal instead of only a flat tire, it would still have good within it so much as it can be used to create new things; the car would have to be completely eliminated in order for it to possess no good. In this way, Augustine concludes that there are only two ways in which a substance can exist: as an incorruptible substance that is purely good, or as a good substance that can suffer corruption; in either case, the substance possesses goodness. It is on this basis of all things containing some good that Augustine begins his discussion of evil.

Augustine posits that evil is not a substance, but rather a privation—that is, an absence of something, in this case an absence of good. Building off of his conclusion that all substances must contain some good in order to exist, Augustine explains that evil cannot be a substance because it contains no good. If evil were to be a substance, then it would have to fall into one of the two categories that Augustine established earlier, either that it is incorruptible and very good or that it is corruptible and thus contains some good. But there is no goodness in evil, so therefore evil cannot be a substance, or else it would have to be in some way good. In this way, evil falls

into a third category of what an entity can be, in that it is incorruptible because it contains no good, and therefore has no substance.

Following this conclusion, Augustine examines how God relates to this connection between good, corruption, and evil. After establishing that evil is a privation, Augustine makes the conclusion that God could not have created evil, for one cannot create something that is not a substance; further, Augustine explains that “you (God) have made all things good, and that there are no substances whatsoever that you have not made.”<sup>2</sup> Continuing to Chapter 13, Augustine examines the nature of evil things. His conclusion is that nothing is evil in God’s eyes, and that all things are good because they were created by God, and possess goodness (recall that Augustine established that all things must possess some good in order to exist). Augustine then addresses the problem of evil things in the world, stating that certain things are thought to be evil only because they do not agree with certain other things. That is, even things that we might perceive to be evil still have goodness within them in some aspect, even if that aspect is one which only God can see. For Augustine, then, the answer to the question “whence is evil” is complicated. This is because it depends on the situation at hand; when one looks at specific substance that is considered evil, its evil comes from its lack of harmony with a particular thing that we consider to be good, whereas the world is taken as a whole the problem of evil disappears, because all the things in the world, “taken together, are very good.”<sup>3</sup>

Augustine’s argument is logistically sound, but it raises a difficult question: if everything in the world is good, and nothing is truly evil, then how can one justify the goodness of the worst evils in the world, such as disease and genocide? Take for instance Hitler and the Holocaust. What good is there within a man who brought about the murder of millions of innocent men, women, and children? According to Augustine, everything possesses good because if it did not have any good then it would cease to exist, but is this still true in something as evil as a man who ordered the genocide of an entire population? Likewise, how could a disease such as cancer contain any goodness, if its entire function in life is to kill? It would seem as if these things do not possess good, and are a substance of evil, but Augustine says that evil is not a substance

but a privation. Furthermore, it seems as if Augustine justifies the evil within these things when he claims in Chapter 13 that "...certain things are thought to be evil because they do not agree with certain others. Yet these same beings agree with others still, and thus they are good."<sup>4</sup> What exactly does Augustine mean when he says that things are good by the way that they agree with "certain other?" Taken at face value, it seems as if Augustine would say that Hitler only appears evil because his actions do not agree with our opinion of goodness, but in reality that they agree with a greater good that we are unable to comprehend in our human nature. How could this be, that Augustine would justify the goodness of such a terrible person?

One way in which Augustine might respond to this query is by saying that there is good within all substances if one looks on a microscopic level. This relates to the proposition that no substance can become fully corrupted, or else it would cease to exist. In the case of Hitler, the argument could be made that he still contains some good in the way that his body functions properly, e.g. his liver and heart function as good livers and hearts do. Similarly, one could posit that cancer has goodness in that the cells fulfill the objective of life to reproduce and thrive, even though they do it in a way that damages the body. Though at first this explanation makes sense, it could be argued that it avoids the question of how someone such as Hitler can be good. Does a functioning heart justify evil acts, or rather, does the goodness in a functioning heart compensate for the other evils enough so that we can say that this person does not possess evil? If we want to truly answer the question of how there is goodness in supposedly evil things, we have to look at the question from a higher point of view.

A microscopic analysis of the good of a substance is the other way in which Augustine might defend his argument from the question of how someone such as Hitler could conform to the principle of universal goodness. In this, one could say that Hitler possesses good in a way in which only God or higher beings are capable of seeing. Augustine expresses this belief when he claims that "To you (God), nothing whatsoever is evil."<sup>5</sup> But what does this mean? When defending the goodness of the substance in this way, does Augustine actually permit the presence of great evils in

that a greater good should come from them, even evils as great as someone who would order the murder of millions of innocent lives? According to the argument that he gives, it would seem that this is the case. If nothing is evil, as he states, then even the things that we view as the greatest evils in the world are good, and thus the question of whether something can be part evil and part good would be irrelevant, because they possess an altogether higher good that defeats evil. This uncomfortable conclusion is what one is left with when they attempt to defend the good of something from a macroscopic level: that even the greatest evils in the world have a greater good within them in that they are a part of nature as a whole.

It is important to consider Augustine's argument precisely because of its uncomfortable nature. If one were to look to Augustine's opinion on the presence of evil in the world for an answer to the question of how Christianity can permit evil to occur, they will not necessarily find the answer they were hoping to receive. The lack of helpfulness in Augustine's argument reminds us that Christianity does not attempt to do away with all evil, but rather provides a medium to better deal with evil when it happens. In total, Augustine's argument about goodness and evil makes sense, but it brings about uncomfortable questions regarding the nature of universal goodness when it is examined from a macroscopic point of view.

## NOTES

1. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image, 2014), 134.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.